



Learning Under Threat: How Immigration Enforcement is Driving Student Absenteeism

Learning Under Threat: How Immigration Enforcement is Driving School Absenteeism

On a normal school morning, the day begins in a familiar rhythm of bells, buses, and backpacks. In communities experiencing heightened federal immigration enforcement, that rhythm has become a thing of the past. One raid. A line of unmarked vehicles. Even credible rumors are enough. Normal routines collapse and are replaced by fear-driven calculation. Families change routes, delay departures, or make the only decision that feels safe: keeping their children home.

When a five-year-old boy is [used as bait](#) by ICE agents, what looks like absenteeism on a spreadsheet is, for many families, a calculated act of protection.

Schools are feeling the impact immediately, with fewer students in seats, unanswered calls home, and a wider emotional distance between families and institutions that are supposed **to be safe, neutral ground.**

When the path to school feels uncertain, the promise of public education becomes conditional, reshaped by fear rather than access.



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When immigration enforcement intensifies nearby, districts are left to absorb the fallout. Schools inherit the academic disruption, the trauma, and the fractured trust created by decisions made far beyond the classroom, while being told to solve an attendance crisis they are not creating but desperately trying to avoid. School should be a safe place for all children.

We are hearing from families who are keeping their kids home, who fear the pick up line and whose children have been pepper sprayed on the bus trying to get home. ICE enforcement is causing students to stay home from school at rates [comparable](#) to the [COVID 19 Crisis](#).

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ICE encounters reported on school grounds since Jan. 21 2025

Read our [methodology](#).

Date	School	District	Metro area	State
Jan. 21, 2026	Columbia Heights High School	Columbia Heights School District	Minneapolis	MN
Jan. 12, 2026	Concord Education Center	Intermediate School District 917	Minneapolis	MN
Jan. 7, 2026	Roosevelt High School	Minneapolis Public Schools	Minneapolis	MN
Nov. 5, 2025	Rayito de Sol Spanish Immersion Early Learning Center	Private	Chicago	IL
Oct. 16, 2025	Thomas Kelly College Preparatory	Chicago Public Schools	Chicago	IL
Aug. 11, 2025	Arleta High School	Los Angeles Unified School District	Los Angeles	CA
Jul. 15, 2025	Guidepost Montessouri School	Private	Portland	OR
Apr. 7, 2025	Russell Elementary School	Los Angeles Unified School District	Los Angeles	CA
Apr. 7, 2025	Lillian Street Elementary Schools	Los Angeles Unified School District	Los Angeles	CA

Table: Jasmine Ye Han and Naaz Modan/K-12 Dive • Source: Compiled incidents from news reports, public officials' announcements, court documents and verified with sources. • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Schools are for Kids, Not Status Checks

The right to a free public K-12 education in the United States is not conditional and it is mandatory. It does not depend on a child's immigration status, their parents' paperwork, or where they were born. The [Supreme Court](#) has been unequivocal: states cannot deny undocumented children access to public education. For decades, that principle was reinforced in practice by [federal guidance](#) designating schools as "sensitive locations" where immigration enforcement activity was limited.

That protection was rolled back on January 20, 2025, when the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) rescinded the sensitive locations guidance and replaced it with [new enforcement directives](#). DHS has since insisted that immigration enforcement near schools should be "[extremely rare](#)," but federal activity doesn't have to occur on school grounds to disrupt schooling. For families, rarity is beside the point.

School is not one place. It is a sequence of places, each of which now carries perceived risk. When families fear encounters with immigration authorities during any part of that daily journey, [daily attendance drops](#), particularly in schools serving immigrant and mixed-status communities.

Fear travels faster than clarification. Social media posts, text messages, and word-of-mouth reports often reach families long before official statements do. In the absence of certainty, families make the safest choice available: keeping children home. In many communities, [just a report](#) of immigration enforcement can be enough to cause a spike in absences.

Students in Minnesota have returned to [remote learning](#) because they are scared to go to school. At the beginning of January, 2026, ICE agents were involved in an incident at [Roosevelt High School](#) in Minneapolis, where a federal agent deployed pepper spray into a crowd of students. Children in mixed-status families stay home to avoid exposure, to care for siblings, or because a caregiver is afraid for anyone to leave the house. A [2025 working paper](#) found that immigration raids coincided with a 22% increase in daily student absences, with especially large increases among younger children. [Another study](#) links enforcement surges to broader academic harm, including declines in test scores, affecting students well beyond those directly targeted.

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National Impact

Reports from cities experiencing heightened enforcement activity describe students who are anxious, distracted, or afraid to be seen near windows. Administrators are shifting into security-style routines, and staff is spending time on crisis response instead of instruction.

► **Minneapolis:** On January 6, 2026 - the same day that students returned to Minneapolis schools after winter break - 2,000 additional immigration agents were sent to the city. These agents were dispatched to carry out what Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) called the “largest immigration operation ever.”

The next day, an ICE officer fatally shot Renee Good.

At a charter high school, attendance fell below 50%, and less than half of the 800 students showed up. Deciding to pivot to online learning, school administrators found themselves struggling to find laptops and mobile hotspots for the students without devices or internet. By the third week of January, attendance was starting to go back up.

Then federal agents shot and killed Alex Petti, and attendance plummeted again.

In Minnesota’s third-largest city, an average of 530 children were missing every day across Rochester Public Schools. This represents an 81% increase in excused absences during the month of January, including a 417% increase among children whose first language is not English.



Photo Credit: NY Times

Danielle Thompson, a district employee, delivers children's clothing and food to a family afraid to leave their home.

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Reports of children and teens being detained by ICE amplify fear, and that fear shows up immediately in attendance data. Schools and communities are doing what federal policy has failed to do: protect children. Mutual aid networks have mobilized to ensure that families have food, transportation and legal support. Teachers are driving students to school, escorting them to buses, and standing watch at arrival and dismissal. Windows are covered. Teachers form human security barriers outside school buildings at the start and end of each day.

At the end of school days in [Fridley, MN](#), the district superintendent drives through neighborhoods with the district's head of security, looking for federal agents in unmarked vehicles, near bus stops and school routes. These patrols are not ceremonial; they are necessary so the district can warn families and adjust school operations accordingly. They are a response to credible patterns of federal activity around schools that have terrified families, increased absences, and forced educators into roles they were never prepared for.



Mark Mickelson, a former police officer who now works for the district, checks on reports of an ICE vehicle at a Fridley park.

Photo Credit: [NY Times](#)

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► **California:** In California's Central Valley, federal immigration raids in January and February 2025 did not merely coincide with school absenteeism - they caused it. Fear spread so rapidly through immigrant communities that nearly a quarter of the students in five districts were absent from school. A [Stanford University study](#) tracked school attendance in the districts over three years, and found a 22% surge in absences following the ICE raids.

That pattern was repeated in Los Angeles. In January 2026, the [superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District](#) publicly acknowledged that students were missing school because families feared immigration enforcement. The consequences are now visible in enrollment data: the nation's second largest school district enrolls [13,000 fewer](#) immigrant students than it did in the 2025-25 school year. This is not a demographic mystery or a gradual shift. These students were pushed out of school by policy-induced fear, transforming immigration enforcement into an unspoken attendance policy with consequences measured in empty desks and lost futures.

► **Denver, CO:** In 2025, [enrollment in Denver Public Schools](#) dropped by roughly 1,200 students, and district officials tied the decrease to lower numbers of new immigrant students. More students left the city's schools than entered during the summer and fall of 2025, reversing a trend that helped stabilize enrollment in recent years. This outmigration sits alongside other pressures - such as declining birth rates and a rising cost of living - but it has added a new layer of uncertainty for schools that are already stretched thin.

Before long, lower enrollment stops being abstract and starts looking like school closures and job loss. Fewer students means fewer staff, fewer classes, and hard conversations about how buildings are used. Denver currently has a moratorium on closing schools based solely on enrollment, unless there is a significant, unexpected change, but the reality is that shrinking classroom numbers will inevitably reshape what daily school life looks like.

► **Charlotte, NC:** In November 2025, the [Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District](#) reported more than 30,000 students were absent from school on the first day following Border Patrol deployment in the city. That number was more than double the number of absences the district recorded the previous week, and represented roughly 20% of the total district enrollment.

Elementary [schools with high Hispanic student populations](#) had some of the lowest attendance rates. And at a majority-Hispanic high school, nearly half the student body was reported absent.

The Loudest Silence in the Attendance Debate

For years, chronic absenteeism has been a rallying cry for leaders on both sides of the aisle. Rising absence rates were framed as moral failure, parental irresponsibility, and proof that [public schools needed harsher discipline and tighter control](#). Instead of trying to solve the wide variety of reasons that students are absent - such as lack of transportation - [truancy policies](#) were justified by weaponized attendance data and sweeping critiques of families. For example, in Minnesota, there are [15 day thresholds](#) before a student becomes truant or requires withdrawal, causing parents to wonder if a referral for changes could also lead immigration officers to their doors.

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Truancy Information for Parents and Families

The Diversion Process

The diversion process begins with the initial efforts between student, family and school. Students and families who engage with school staff in an attempt to develop a plan to increase attendance have higher rates of changing the behavior.

Therefore, early responses from parents when their child first begins to show signs of avoiding school is essential to increasing school attendance and therefore overall school success.

Youth under the age of 12 years old may be referred to Scott County Health and Human Services for unexcused absences equaling 7 or more school days. During that age it is important that parents realize they are determined as 100% responsible in assuring their children are enrolled and attending school.

Youth who are 12 years old through 17 years old may be referred to the County Attorney's Office once their unexcused absences have reached 7 full school days and attempts to increase school attendance through collaboration with school staff have been unsuccessful.

In cities like Charlotte and Minneapolis, attendance didn't decline slowly; it collapsed overnight. Tens of thousands of students stayed home and some schools saw attendance drop below fifty percent. This wasn't due to post-pandemic aftershocks; this absenteeism was a direct, predictable response to federal immigration enforcement activity and the fear it created. We invite that coalition of bipartisan leaders to come together to demand accountability when students miss school, especially when federal immigration policy is the reason why.

Utilizing Local Control to Protect Families

Schools cannot rewrite federal immigration policy, but they are being forced to absorb the consequences. In the absence of clear federal safeguards, districts across the country have stepped into a role they never sought.

Districts have been compelled to institute formal procedures for encounters with law enforcement – not because schools have changed, but because the environment around them has. Administrators are training front office staff on how to respond to immigration agents, clarifying who has authority to communicate with law enforcement, what legal documentation is required, and which spaces on campus are not open to entry without a warrant. Districts are also reasserting that students have a legal right to attend school, regardless of immigration status.

- ▷ In California, officials released a 54-page guide outlining state and federal protections for students and procedures for responding to law enforcement requests ranging from documents to interviews with students. These messages are not political; they are corrective.
- ▷ Chicago Public Schools' Board of Education passed a resolution in November 2024 that said schools would not assist ICE in enforcing immigration law.
- ▷ In December 2024, Des Moines, Iowa Public Schools released a statement affirming a 2017 resolution limiting interactions with ICE officials.

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- In March 2025, the [Winooski School District](#) approved the Sanctuary School policy, restricting immigration agents' access to school grounds and limiting the sharing of student information with federal authorities.

When enforcement activity or credible fear causes attendance to collapse, districts have turned to [short-term stabilization measures](#), including flexible attendance policies and remote learning options. But these are not substitutes for in-person education, and we do not need another proof point for the long-term harms that prolonged virtual learning can cause. At best, these measures are stopgaps meant to prevent days of fear from turning into weeks or months of disengagement. At the same time, schools are creating "[security bubbles](#)" by escorting students to buses, covering windows and restructuring daily routines.

These are not the signs of a functioning education system. They are the signs of a system operating under threat.

Recognizing that internal measures are not enough, [education advocates are speaking out](#) and warning Congress that immigration enforcement practices are directly harming student attendance, mental health, and academic outcomes. [Parent organizations](#) have issued formal condemnations when enforcement activity has intersected with school routes or resulted in the detention of children. This public pushback is not ideological; it is defensive. Schools are raising the personal costs of political actions that treat education as collateral damage, because silence would mean complicity in harm.

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Conclusion

Kids are not attending school because they do not feel safe or free to do so. This is quite simply UnAmerican. We have seen broad, bipartisan agreement on protecting pro-family locations like schools, hospitals and places of worship through multiple administrations. Now is not the time to let up on our values of protecting families and children.

Across Charlotte, Los Angeles, Denver, Minneapolis, and countless other U.S. cities, the pattern is consistent. Right now, children are missing school not because families do not value education, but because federal activity and uncertainty make attending class feel unsafe. The consequences will continue to grow: learning loss, trauma, disengagement, and long-term academic harm that reaches beyond undocumented students. Schools have stepped into the breach with protocols, trauma-informed supports, and flexible learning options. But these are acts of harm reduction and not an indication that the system is functioning as intended. Schools cannot resolve a crisis they did not create, and they cannot message their way out of a fear that is grounded in lived experience.

If policymakers are serious about chronic absenteeism, educational recovery, and student well-being, then they must acknowledge the impact immigration enforcement activity has already had on children. A right that cannot be safely exercised is not a right at all. Until federal policy once again prioritizes access to education, schools will have to continue managing the fall out, and children will continue to pay the price.

There is a clear path forward. Congress has until February 13, 2026 to negotiate an appropriations bill for the Department of Homeland Security, and any funding allocated to ICE and CBP must come with strong guardrails, consistent oversight, and a clear focus on public safety.

Congress must legislate clear, enforceable protections for schools, hospitals, and places of worship. For decades, administrations of both parties recognized these as sensitive locations. Those protections were revoked by the Trump Administration, but the DHS appropriations bill poses an absolutely critical moment to restore these safeguards and protect children's fundamental safety and wellbeing.

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