



Welcoming Schools Report Summary

The Pennsylvania Immigration and Citizenship Coalition (PICC) conducted a questionnaire in 2019, to better understand the educational experience of immigrant, refugee, and undocumented students and their parents across Pennsylvania. PICC staff conducted 17 collaborative workshops with students, parents, and partner organizations which provided information based on their specific needs. These questionnaires were voluntary, anonymous, and completed by 105 students, and 12 parents for a total of 117 responses.

Safe and Welcoming Environment

Safety was a significant concern for students, with 67% of students surveyed indicating they do not feel safe while at school. One student wrote in “I’m not safe,” even though it was a closed response question. Almost a third of students expressed concern about the possibility of ICE presence at schools, while about half of the students indicated that the school had communicated what to do if ICE were to come to their school.

29% of students were concerned about ICE. Of those concerned:

- 51% identified as US citizens,
- 22% were undocumented
- 16% did not identify their status
- 1 naturalized citizen

Schools can make students feel safer by:

- Embracing and celebrating diversity
- Creating and supporting immigrant led initiatives (clubs, groups, events, volunteering, etc.)
- Providing quality language access support
- Setting policies in place around ICE enforcement, and clearly communicating to staff and community
- Teachers and staff displaying compassion, support, and fostering empowerment

Bullying was also connected to student safety concerns – 8 students indicated they were specifically bullied due to reasons tied to race, immigrant identity, and ethnicity. 13% of students did not feel that schools staff provided sufficient support during times of bullying.

Even though safety was a predominant concern, the majority of students shared that they felt their school welcomed immigrant students.

Language Access

The 2019 responses echo the 2018 findings that language access is an important condition for students and parents feeling welcomed and supported by their schools. The majority – 84% – of student’s first languages were not English, with 47.6% preferring to speak or read in a language other than English. 78% of students indicated they received communications in their preferred language for outreach. Students also indicated that language access was an important factor in feeling safe and welcomed at school, and impacted their ability to participate. This is highlighted by student responses about safety mentioning multiple languages spoken and bilingual staff as empowering factors.

“My daughter translates all of the documents for me”

Parent Respondent

Language Access is Critical to Student Success:

- All documents need to be professionally translated
- Schools need to provide access to professional interpretation services for students and parents
- Schools should track language preferences, and monitor the quality of their language access programs
- Children are not to act as interpreters

Parents also highlighted that language access was critical for their participation in their child's education and school activities. 58% of parents responded that school forms and other information are not given in their preferred language, with one parent writing in "No, the ones I

receive are in English," even though it was a closed response question. Fear of embarrassment due to language differences, not being able to understand teachers/staff, and using English as the primary language on school forms/applications were the main barriers hindering parental involvement.

Teacher and Staff Development

Teachers and staff have a significant impact on the emotional and educational well-being of immigrant students and their families. Teachers acting in supportive, empowering, and compassionate manners were important to students, with 59% of students indicating these as factors helping them feel safe and welcome at school. Students also shared that having bilingual staff and teachers was essential for feeling welcome.

"We have a lot of diversity. The teachers and staff help you a lot if you need the help."

Student Respondent

Even though the majority of students indicated they felt welcome at school, 47% of students were unsure if there were immigrant specific resources available within their school. Additionally, several students shared instances of teachers acting rude or disrespectfully, and not exposing their classmates to different cultures.

Academic Support and Opportunities

Students communicated a strong desire for more academic support and opportunities to grow. Only 37% of students indicated they felt school was preparing them for work or college after graduation, with 27% believing school was preparing them for a 4-year college.

"Yes, because we practice. Sometimes I have trouble with history because I don't understand what they are trying to say."

Student Response

Of students not currently enrolled in Advanced Placement (AP) classes, 20% indicated they would like to be. Just over half, 51%, of students felt that their class and homework was appropriate for their age, grade and skill level. Academic strengths included interesting classes, healthy challenge, and supportive teachers. Language difficulty, high work load, and inconsistent classes were indicated as barriers to academic success.

The addition in 2019 of questions specifically for students in ESL classes provided additional information on their experiences. About 15% of students felt they were not being challenged due to their lack of English proficiency, and only 21% felt they had access to all educational or academic programs at their school.