



'The impact has been real': ICE raid fears keep students out of classrooms

Educators tell NBC News they've seen a dip in attendance and increased anxiety among some students during the Trump administration.

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The Trump administration's policy allowing Immigration and Customs Enforcement to make arrests in schools is bringing down attendance and driving up fear and anxiety among students and teachers, a group representing 78 large school districts across the country is arguing in court.

The group, the Council of Great City Schools, filed an amicus brief late last month supporting a lawsuit that the Denver public school system has filed against the Trump administration asking for relief from the policy.

In a press release about the amicus brief, the council said it had conducted a survey about the policy among its 78 member school districts and found that "they have already seen increased absenteeism, higher anxiety among students, increased bullying, less parental involvement, and heightened fear as a result of the change in guidance."

In January, the Trump administration rescinded a policy that had been in place since the Obama era, including during the first Trump administration, that largely prohibited ICE from conducting operations in schools, houses of worship and hospitals. There is no evidence that ICE has arrested students in schools so far.

In response to the lawsuit, the Trump administration has said the schools have not been harmed, in part, because no students have been arrested in schools.

But Denver Public Schools Superintendent Alex Marrero argues that, regardless of whether ICE has actually gone into one of his schools, the news of the change in policy alone has caused injury to the plaintiffs.

Speaking to NBC News in the library of a Denver school, he said the attendance rate there has dropped from 95% to 85% since a Feb. 5 immigration raid at two nearby apartment buildings.

"We don't have to wait for them to walk through those doors, the impact has been real," Marrero said. "And in this very library, the day of the raid, which — it didn't happen in our schools, but it happened nearby, the emotion, the fear and the terror in the eyes of our educators was significant. So no one can tell me that we weren't harmed. It's clear as day to me."

That same day, Nadia Madan-Morrow, the principal of the school, said buses that were supposed to be taking children to her school were diverted because of the commotion at the apartment buildings. And she held children at school that day rather than dismissing them early, as had been planned, because parents asked her to wait until they knew it was safe.

"ICE agents have now gone to their apartment buildings, and they're calling us and telling us, 'Don't put our students on the bus. We don't want them coming here,'" Madan-Morrow said, recalling the calls she received from parents that day.

Four students from her school were arrested in the ICE raids and have not returned, she said. NBC News has not confirmed the identities of those students or whether they had criminal or immigration violations.

Another person arrested that day was Maria Gonzalez, an immigrant from El Salvador. Gonzalez said ICE broke down her door without knocking, leaving a gaping hole. She was taken into the hallway and placed in plastic handcuffs, she said. She was then taken into ICE custody, leaving behind her daughters, Nicolle, 9, a student in Denver Public Schools, and Jade, 11 months old.

"My biggest fear was that they would send me to some place and deport me and they would leave my babies," she said.

She was released six hours later and reunited with her children.

Her lawyer, Matthew Barringer, said Gonzalez had crossed the border illegally twice from El Salvador but has not committed any violent crimes. Gonzalez's daughter Nicolle has been given a notice to appear before an immigration judge this

month, at which point, Barringer said, he will be notifying the immigration court that she is in the process of applying for special immigrant juvenile status to eventually make her a permanent resident.

For now, Gonzalez said, Nicolle cries at night and is scared to go to school because she is worried ICE will come there, especially after she heard a rumor one day that its agents were standing nearby, though they did not come inside her school.

Asked what she thinks about in school, Nicolle said, “That they can come again to school and this time they will be able to enter and they will take us.”

Lizyuri Gallardo, a counselor at the school in Denver where Madan-Morrow is the principal, said 300 of the 900 students at her school have sought counseling this year, mostly to discuss their fear of deportations. While the school system does not track students’ immigration status, Madan-Morrow said that more than 80% of the students come from families where a language other than English is spoken in the home.

Gallardo says she tries to make students feel emotionally prepared for anything they might encounter and to try to ease their anxiety at school

“I think that something we do here that is so beautiful at our school is telling them that we love them and that we care about them, and that we are a family and that we’re here to support them,” she said.

But the anxiety is something Gallardo continues to see, even without ICE coming into the building.

“Kids feel it. Kids are the first to feel it. They’re like little sponges,” she said.

On Friday, Denver Public Schools and lawyers for the Trump administration will present oral arguments in federal court over whether ICE should reinstate the policy that largely prohibited its agents from going into schools and other so-called sensitive locations without supervisor approval.

“[ICE] supervisory law enforcement personnel exercise judgment in making case-by-case determinations regarding whether, where, and when to conduct an immigration enforcement action at or near a school,” an ICE spokesperson told NBC News. “ICE does not typically conduct immigration enforcement activities at schools or school buses. Such law enforcement actions are conducted only when warranted by exigent circumstances and approved by a supervisory law enforcement official. As a law enforcement agency, ICE expects all employees to

adhere to the highest standards of professional conduct and to demonstrate integrity and professionalism in all aspects of their work.”