Beyond Protection

An Administrator's Guide to Building Belonging in a Time of Fear

A response to the December 2025 'Fear is Everywhere' report authored by education scholars John Rogers and Joseph Kahne, along with colleagues at UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access

Re-Imagining MIGRATION

What's Happening in Schools Right Now

In December 2025, education scholars John Rogers and Joseph Kahne, along with colleagues at UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, released *"The Fear is Everywhere": U.S. High School Principals Report Widespread Effects of Immigration Enforcement*. The study surveyed over 600 high school principals nationally and conducted follow-up interviews with 49 of them. The researchers had set out to study civic education, but one issue dominated: the impact of immigration enforcement on students, families, and school communities.

The numbers are stark:

- 70% of principals report students from immigrant families expressing fear about their safety and their families' safety
- 64% report students from immigrant families missing school
- 58% report immigrant families leaving their communities entirely
- 36% report bullying and harassment directed at immigrant-origin students

These aren't statistics from border states or major cities alone. Principals in Tennessee, Wisconsin, Nebraska, and Minnesota describe the same patterns. A principal in Wisconsin recounted students telling classmates, "Just make sure you have your ID with you."

The fear extends beyond students who are themselves undocumented. Approximately 5 million children in the United States live in homes with at least one undocumented parent. Many more have extended family members, neighbors, or community members affected. When a student watches their parent afraid to drive to the grocery store, when rumors circulate about workplace raids, when classmates disappear without explanation—the impact ripples through entire school communities.

How Schools Are Responding

Schools across the country have mobilized to protect students and families. According to the UCLA study:

- 78% of principals created emergency response plans for potential ICE visits
- 47% created plans to support students if parents are detained or deported
- 57% partnered with community organizations supporting immigrant families.
- 33% connected families with legal services

Many of these partnerships reflect deeper collaborative relationships where community organizations sometimes take the lead in supporting families.

This protective work matters. It keeps students and families safer in immediate danger. Principals describe training staff, developing contingency plans with families, setting up meal trains for families who lost income, and even starting GoFundMe pages to help students pay rent when parents were detained.

These actions are important. We know that students are looking to their teachers for safety and support. Indeed, when students are in crisis, you respond to the crisis. But remember, belonging begins with safety, but it doesn’t end there.

What Protection Cannot Do

But here is what the UCLA report also reveals: the fear is pervasive even in schools where no enforcement action has occurred. Principals explain that they have students who are afraid to come to school based on rumors. They describe classmates turning on each other, echoing rhetoric they heard at home, online, or from politicians. They describe a climate where political messages have "normalized attacks on immigrant communities."

One Texas principal captured the shift:

> *"We had some students that reported that some of their peers were saying, 'Go back home, you don't belong here.' And that hadn't been their experience before—until this administration. Students told her: 'I've known this kid since 3rd grade, and he's never called me names.'"*

This is the gap that protective measures cannot close. Emergency protocols respond to enforcement actions—but they cannot prevent a classmate from absorbing anti-immigrant rhetoric and directing it at a peer. Legal services help families navigate the system—but they cannot rebuild a student's sense of belonging after being told they don't belong by someone they trusted.

The deeper problem: support for immigrant students has generally been concentrated in specialized programs—EL/MLL instruction, targeted interventions, crisis response—rather than embedded in how schools operate for everyone. When students transition out of specialized programs, when political winds shift, when crisis hits—they enter environments that were not designed with them in mind. The infrastructure to support them doesn't exist.

Protection responds to a crisis. Belonging prevents the next one.

Why This Matters for Your School

You may be thinking: this isn't our situation. We haven't had an uptick in immigration enforcement. Our community is supportive. I haven’t heard immigrant families expressing fear.

Consider what the UCLA research reveals: fear is pervasive, not because enforcement is pervasive, but because belonging was never systematically established. When political rhetoric shifts, when a parent loses a job, when a classmate repeats something they heard, students discover whether their school is a place where they genuinely belong or what felt like acceptance was simply provisional accommodation.

There's another reason this matters beyond immigrant students. Twenty-six percent of U.S. school-age children come from immigrant backgrounds. But the work of building belonging—creating environments where students are known, where diverse experiences are valued, where students learn to navigate difference—benefits everyone. Researchers call this the "curb cut effect": accommodations designed for specific populations often improve conditions for all. When schools build infrastructure for immigrant student belonging, all students learn what it means to be part of a community that values everyone.

Building Belonging as Infrastructure

Belonging becomes infrastructure when it's embedded in systems that persist regardless of which staff members are present, which political party holds power, or whether there's an immediate crisis. Belonging in schools is supported through four interconnected domains:

1. Relational Infrastructure

How the school systematically ensures every student is known, valued, and connected—through culture, rituals, structures, and daily practice.

What to assess:

- Do students feel that they have a teacher that is proud of them and one that they could go to if they need help?
- Do school rituals, celebrations, and daily routines signal that all students and families belong—or do some feel like guests in someone else's space?
- Are there structured opportunities for sustained relationships between students and adults who know them well?
- Does the institution adapt to students and families, or are they expected to conform to existing structures?
- How are families welcomed and engaged—as partners with knowledge to contribute, or as recipients of information?

What to build:

- Professional development focus on asset-based and culturally responsive approaches to working with immigrant youth.
- School-wide norms, rituals, and routines that make belonging visible and felt
- Structures (advisory, mentoring, homeroom, or other mechanisms) that ensure every student has sustained connection with adults who know them
- Family engagement practices that honor what families bring and create genuine partnership
- Genuine partnerships with community-based organizations that support immigrant families—not just referral relationships, but collaborative relationships built on trust and mutual understanding, where community organizations sometimes take the lead. These partnerships extend the school's reach and create continuity for families that no single institution can provide alone
- Physical spaces, signage, and symbols that reflect the community the school actually serves

2. Curricular Infrastructure

How teaching and learning helps students see migration as a throughline of human experience—already present in the content we teach, the books we share, the ideas we explore.

What to assess:

- Do students encounter migration as a theme across subjects—in the literature they read, the history they study, the science they explore—or only as an isolated topic or current event?
- When teachers teach about DNA in biology, population statistics, world geography, literature—do they help students see migration as part of what they're learning?
- Do all students have opportunities to explore their own family's migration stories and see those stories as connected to larger human patterns?

What to build:

- Curriculum mapping that surfaces where migration already appears—in the novels taught, the historical periods covered, the scientific concepts explored—and makes those connections visible to students
- Instructional approaches that help students explore their own family histories and locate those stories within broader patterns of human movement

- Professional learning that helps teachers across subjects recognize and name migration as a throughline in what they already teach

3. Professional Infrastructure

How the school ensures every educator—regardless of subject area—develops capacity to build belonging across difference.

What to assess:

- Is building everyone's responsibility, or delegated to EL/MLL specialists, the SEL team, and counselors?
- Do content teachers feel equipped to facilitate conversations about identity, belonging, and difficult topics when they arise?
- Does our professional learning address both immediate crisis response and long-term capacity building?

What to build:

- Professional learning that reaches all staff, not just specialists
- Shared strategies and protocols across departments
- Connections to external networks (fellowships, learning communities) that sustain this work over time

4. Student Leadership Infrastructure

How the school equips students themselves to build belonging among peers—so educators aren't constantly playing defense.

What to assess:

- Do student-led groups (alliance clubs, affinity groups, student government) take active roles in building school culture?
- Are students equipped to respond to hate speech and rhetoric among peers, or does this fall entirely to adults?
- Do student leaders reflect the diversity of your school community?

What to build:

- Alliance or affinity clubs with explicit missions around solidarity and belonging
- Student leadership training in facilitation, peer support, and constructive response to conflict
- Pathways for genuine student voice in school policy and culture

A Progression, Not a Checklist

This isn't about doing everything at once. It's about recognizing where you are and moving deliberately toward more systemic approaches:

Domain	Reactive	Proactive	Systemic
Relational	Support students in crisis	Train staff; improve family communication	Culture, rituals, and structures designed for belonging
Curricular	Address incidents as teachable moments	Add migration unit or heritage month	Migration visible as a throughline across the curriculum
Professional	Share emergency protocols	PD for interested staff	Belonging embedded in professional culture school-wide
Student Leadership	Discipline bullying when reported	Launch diversity, alliance club, and institute restorative justice practices	Students lead peer-to-peer belonging initiatives

Most schools operate in either the reactive or the proactive column. The goal is to build toward systemic approaches—where belonging doesn't depend on crisis response or individual champions, but is embedded in how the school operates.

Where to Start

You don't need a comprehensive plan to begin. Choose one entry point based on your context:

If you're in crisis mode:

Focus first on protection—establish your emergency protocols, connect families with resources, and support staff who are overwhelmed. But as you do this work, notice: which students are being seen, and which aren't? What relationships exist that are helping students through this moment? That's your foundation for building further. (See our Massachusetts Emergency Response Guide for Educators)

If you have breathing room:

Conduct a belonging audit. Use a structured tool (e.g., Re-Imagining Migration's Building Belonging Assessment) to identify where your school currently stands across the four domains. Engage a cross-functional team in the reflection—the conversation itself builds shared understanding and reveals priorities. (Start with our Building Belonging Assessment)

If you want to start with curriculum:

Pick one course or grade level. Ask: Where does migration already appear? Where could exploring family stories strengthen existing units? What primary sources could make this personal for all students? Start small, document what works, and build from there. (Our Guide to Creating Curriculum can help)

If you want to start with relationships:

Assess your advisory or homeroom structure. Is it actually building relationships, or just managing logistics? If you don't have an advisory, identify one existing structure that could serve as a space for sustained adult-student connection. What would it take to make that space matter? (See our Guide to Serving Immigrant Youth and English Learners)

The Work Ahead

The UCLA report documents principals who describe feeling unable to protect students despite their best efforts. One California principal said: "No matter how many times we tell them we will support you, we will protect you... the fear is everywhere."

This isn't a failure of individual educators. It's a gap developed by lack of incentives and a failure of institutional design. Schools were not built to systematically create belonging for immigrant-origin students. Indeed, the relationship between belonging, safety, academic, civic, and social thriving has niot been well understood. Without that infastructure, pluralism and diversity are often seen as challenges to be managed and not the foundation for future success. Therefore, when crisis arrives, there's no infrastructure to absorb it.

Building that infrastructure is civic work. It's what public schools in a diverse democracy are supposed to do. It requires moving beyond crisis response toward the slower, steadier work of building systems where every student is known, where migration is understood as central to American identity, where educators across the building have capacity for this work, and where students themselves are equipped to build belonging among peers.

Protection keeps students safer today. Belonging infrastructure builds schools where all students can thrive—regardless of what comes next.

Re-Imagining Migration supports educators in building belonging for immigrant-origin students through curriculum resources, professional learning, and regional fellowship networks. Learn more at **reimaginingmigration.org**

All References are from: Rogers, J., Kahne, J., La Torre, D., Castro, C., Stern, S., Bronstein, M., and Ishimoto, M. (2025). "The Fear is Everywhere": U.S. High School Principals Report Widespread Effects of Immigration Enforcement. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.