

# Immigration Enforcement Actions and Empty Desks: Persistent and Acute Attendance Effects

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## **Why immigration enforcement is now an attendance issue.**

Since January 2025, the federal government has sharply escalated immigration enforcement, disrupting immigrant communities nationwide. A growing body of research is documenting the effects on K–12 schools, and the early evidence is alarming: studies in California, Connecticut, and Rhode Island all show sharp increases in absences among immigrant-origin students after the enforcement surge.

This matters because attendance is the entry point for everything else schools do. Students who aren't in the building can't learn, build relationships with teachers, or earn the credits they need to progress. When external events systematically pull them out, the academic costs compound over time, no matter how strong the instruction inside the building.

The existing research on immigration enforcement and attendance has left important questions unanswered. Most studies rely on aggregate school- or district-level data, which can't reveal which students are most affected or how individual attendance shifts over time. Most also use indirect proxies for immigrant status, such as multilingual learner classification or home language, that miss some immigrant-origin students and sweep in many U.S.-born ones with no direct enforcement exposure. While some prior work distinguishes short-term from longer-term effects, this study draws a clean line between two ways enforcement could shape attendance: short, sharp spikes in absences on the day of a specific enforcement event versus a sustained, ongoing increase in absences across the entire enforcement period.

The distinction shapes how schools should respond. If the effects are acute, schools can mobilize around specific events; if they're persistent, schools need sustained engagement strategies that don't depend on tracking individual incidents. This study takes up each of those unanswered questions, tracking individual students over time, identifying immigrant-origin students more directly than prior work, and separating acute spikes from sustained change.

## STUDY AND METHODS

This study uses daily student-level administrative records from a mid-sized, immigrant-receiving district in the northeastern United States (anonymized in the paper as "Liberty City"), covering roughly 1.35 million student-by-school-day observations across the 2022–23 through 2024–25 school years. The district has a strong institutional orientation toward immigrant inclusion, including a 2024 policy explicitly prohibiting the sharing of undocumented students' information with federal agencies.

The researchers then combined these attendance records with a detailed timeline of immigration enforcement actions (IEAs) in the Liberty City community, assembled through partnership with district staff, a local immigrant advocacy organization, and a Freedom of Information Act request to ICE. They used student birthplace records (collected at enrollment) to identify the treated group of students born outside the United States, with U.S.-born students serving as the comparison group. They define the treatment period as beginning January 20, 2025, the date of the presidential inauguration, though they test a range of possible start dates from the 2024 election through February 1, 2025, just after the first arrest in Liberty City. The results hold up regardless of where in this window the treatment period begins.

Using a difference-in-differences design with student and calendar-day fixed effects, the researchers estimate how the daily probability of absence changed for foreign-born students relative to their U.S.-born peers after the 2025 inauguration. They then decompose this overall effect into a persistent component (the average elevation in absences across all post-inauguration days that fall outside any specific event window) and an acute component (additional spikes in absences on days proximate to documented IEAs).

## KEY FINDINGS

### **1 The increase in immigration enforcement caused a large and sustained increase in absences among foreign-born students.**

- After the January 2025 inauguration and the enforcement surge that followed, foreign-born students' daily probability of being absent rose by 2.2 percentage points, a 37% increase over their pre-enforcement absence rate of 5.9%. Over the 93 school days after the inauguration in 2025, that adds up to about two extra absences per student.
- The effect appeared immediately at the inauguration, held steady through the end of the school year, and showed no sign of fading over time.

### **2 The effect was mainly due to a sustained decrease in attendance after inauguration day, not a set of one-day reactions to specific enforcement events.**

- The authors separated two possible patterns: a constant elevation in absences across the whole period versus sharp spikes right around enforcement events.
- The steady elevation was by far the bigger driver, and it showed no signs of fading by the end of the school year.

- Specific local enforcement events did produce small, short-lived bumps (about 0.6 percentage points on the day of a local event), but these were minor compared to the persistent effect.

**3 The attendance impact increases steadily with grade level, with little effect in the early grades and the largest effects among high school students..**

- Effects were small or undetectable in pre-K through early elementary, then rose steadily with grade level, reaching roughly 3 to 6 percentage points in high school.
- Because younger children's attendance is essentially a parental decision, this suggests older students are responding on their own. They follow the news, they perceive the risk, and some may face direct enforcement exposure themselves. This is especially concerning because absences in the upper grades carry steep costs for credit accumulation, course completion, and on-time graduation.

**4 The way most other studies identify at-risk students undercounts the negative impacts.**

- The authors used student birthplace, a more direct measure of enforcement vulnerability, and got larger estimates than when they used the proxies districts typically rely on (multilingual learner status, home language, recent-immigrant flags). Each of those proxies produced a smaller number. This means that studies that rely on these proxies are likely underestimating the true effect on the students most directly affected.

**5 These findings are probably a conservative estimate of the impact of immigration enforcement on foreign-born student attendance.**

- The study took place in a district with unusually strong protections and a welcoming stance toward immigrant families. Municipal and school leaders have taken deliberate steps to protect immigrant families, including explicit district policies limiting cooperation with federal immigration authorities.
- The fact that substantial attendance disruptions occurred even in this protective context suggests that effects in less welcoming districts may be much larger.

## POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

**1 Since the attendance decline reflects a generalized sense of risk more than specific events, districts may reduce it by communicating clearly and proactively about their own policies, like their cooperation with federal immigration authorities, emergency care planning, and safe travel to and from school**

- If families are keeping children home in response to a general climate of fear rather than to particular enforcement actions, then the uncertainty itself is part of what districts can address. This won't remove the external pressures, but it may reduce the ambiguity that appears to sustain disengagement.

**2 Prioritize outreach and academic recovery supports for older immigrant-origin students.**

- The effects are concentrated in middle and high school, and absences in these grades carry the highest academic costs. Younger students are not unaffected, but the burden on older students is substantially greater.

**3 All educators and school personnel need awareness of how enforcement is affecting students and the tools to respond, not just bilingual or immigrant-origin staff.**

- The effects are broad enough that awareness shouldn't sit only with multilingual or immigrant-origin staff; all educators and personnel should understand what's happening and how to respond.

**4 Using MLL status or home language will likely undercount the students being affected. Leaders should interpret those measures as conservative and assume the real reach is wider.**

## FULL WORKING PAPER

This report is based on the EdWorkingPaper "*Immigration Enforcement Actions and Empty Desks: Persistent and Acute Attendance Effects*," published in April 2026. The full research paper can be found here: <https://doi.org/10.26300/bz9z-w627>.

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