

A child with a backpack walking on a sidewalk. The child is wearing a white shirt and dark shorts, and is carrying a large, patterned backpack. The sidewalk is made of concrete slabs, and there is a brick wall on the right side. The background is slightly blurred, showing a street with a crosswalk.

WINTER/SPRING 2026

Protecting Student Learning in the Era of Immigration Enforcement

A Report from the Coalition for Authentic Community Engagement & Kids First Chicago

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WINTER/SPRING 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY


Chicago's fall surge in federal immigration enforcement turned a safety crisis into an attendance crisis for thousands of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) families. Districtwide averages stayed relatively steady, but they masked sharp attendance declines in neighborhoods where enforcement activity was most visible. When students stayed home, families were not opting out of school—they were prioritizing safety.

What the Data Show

Schools in Little Village, Albany Park, Belmont Cragin, Gage Park, and Back of the Yards reported sharp attendance declines following immigration actions. Principals described sudden spikes in absenteeism as families kept children home out of fear, not disengagement. In the absence of coordinated supports, community members and individual schools organized informal safe-walk programs and escorts to help students reach school.

The impact extended far beyond a small number of neighborhoods. Following the start of Operation Midway Blitz, 38 of Chicago's 77 community areas experienced attendance declines greater than the districtwide average.

Roughly 40 percent of those communities are home to large immigrant or Latine populations. On September 29—the Monday after federal Border



Roughly 14,000 students from predominantly Latine schools stayed home on September 29, 2025.

Patrol agents conducted visible enforcement activity downtown—nearly 14,000 students attending predominantly Latine schools stayed home, representing approximately 12 percent of enrollment at those schools.¹

Why It Matters

Attendance is one of the strongest predictors of academic success and graduation. Even short-term absences disrupt instruction, services, meals, and routines. In a system still recovering from pandemic-related absenteeism, additional fear-driven absences compound risk.

How Families, Schools, and Communities Responded

During the fall surge, families and community organizations stepped in where systems were not prepared. Parents organized walking school buses, carpools, and neighborhood watch efforts. Schools improvised supports—sending materials home, conducting wellness checks, and adjusting routines—while community-based organizations used limited staff and resources to monitor routes and share real-time information.

Federal officials have signaled plans to return to Chicago in the spring with renewed, large-scale enforcement efforts. The networks families built were necessary and resourceful, but they are uneven, fragile, and unsustainable without coordinated city leadership and adequate preparation

¹State of Illinois. Operation Midway Blitz: The Economic and Human Costs to Illinois Communities. Gov. Pritzker Office Press Release, December 11, 2025.

Summary of Recommendations

Chicago has a narrow window to prepare before immigration enforcement is expected to scale up again. The fall made clear that when systems are not in place, families improvise, and students stay home. The actions below focus on building readiness now—using existing programs and partnerships—so schools and communities can respond quickly and consistently if enforcement intensifies again.

1. Prioritize and Prepare High-Risk Communities

CPS and the City should focus immediate preparation in neighborhoods with the largest fall attendance disruptions—strengthening arrival/dismissal coverage, publishing weekly districtwide and regional absenteeism reporting to guide resource alignment, delivering rapid-response training for principals and staff, and developing individualized safety plans for students whose families express heightened concern.

2. Build School-Based Sanctuary Teams

Schools most affected should formalize School-Based Sanctuary Teams anchored by a staff lead (and Whole School Safety Committees where they exist) and paired Parent Action Teams. Together, they should coordinate safety planning, map safe locations and carpools, and maintain clear multilingual communication channels—including secure options when appropriate—so families know who to contact and what to do.

3. Strengthen Safe Passage and Expand Community Safety Coverage

Safe Passage should be restored and expanded based on community need—longer coverage windows, expanded routes in impacted neighborhoods, stronger training and compensation, and the ability to surge staffing during peak periods. Where walking routes are unsafe or impractical, CPS and the City should pilot targeted transportation supports.

4. Establish Safe Routes and Coordinate a Citywide Safe Haven Network

Chicago should map and publish safe routes, designate safe havens with consistent standards (signage, points of contact, and supervision protocols), and clarify city agency responsibilities so families understand what protections exist around schools and along commute corridors.

5. Ensure Academic Continuity and Mental-Health Support During Disruptions

CPS should expand trauma-informed mental-health supports for students, caregivers, and staff; ensure devices/connectivity are ready; and offer limited, case-by-case remote access and tutoring when a documented safety risk exists—paired with referrals for food and economic support so temporary fear does not create long-term academic harm.

Chicago cannot control federal immigration policy. But it can control how the city responds to protect children. Safe commutes are not optional; they are a prerequisite for learning, stability, and opportunity. Regardless of views on federal policy, Chicago’s children are innocent and should not bear the consequences of enforcement actions. Families are already doing their part. It is time for the city to walk alongside them.

**“If they take me,
who will take care of my kid?”**

–CPS Parent in Belmont Cragin

INTRODUCTION

Chicago experienced an unprecedented surge in federal immigration enforcement in fall 2025. In some neighborhoods, agents were present near transit stops, commercial corridors, and along routes students use to get to school. Families saw it. Children saw it. And daily routines changed.

Parents faced a question they should never have to weigh against their child’s education: Is it safe enough to walk to school today?

In several communities, attendance declined during the weeks when enforcement activity was most visible. Families were not turning away from school. They were trying to keep their children safe.

Chicago’s children did not create these conditions, yet they are living with the consequences. Chicago has an obligation to ensure students can reach school safely and consistently.

How a Safety Crisis Became an Attendance Crisis

The fall enforcement surge changed the daily commute for thousands of CPS students. Families already managing neighborhood violence or instability suddenly faced another layer of fear. For many, the decision to keep children home was not about avoiding school. It was about staying alive, staying together, and avoiding the risk of family separation.

One principal described the effect plainly. In a school of roughly 250 students, 60 to 80 were absent each day during peak enforcement.

Another principal began sending laptops and materials home because they could not wait for direction while children stayed home out of fear. Schools were improvising because families were improvising.

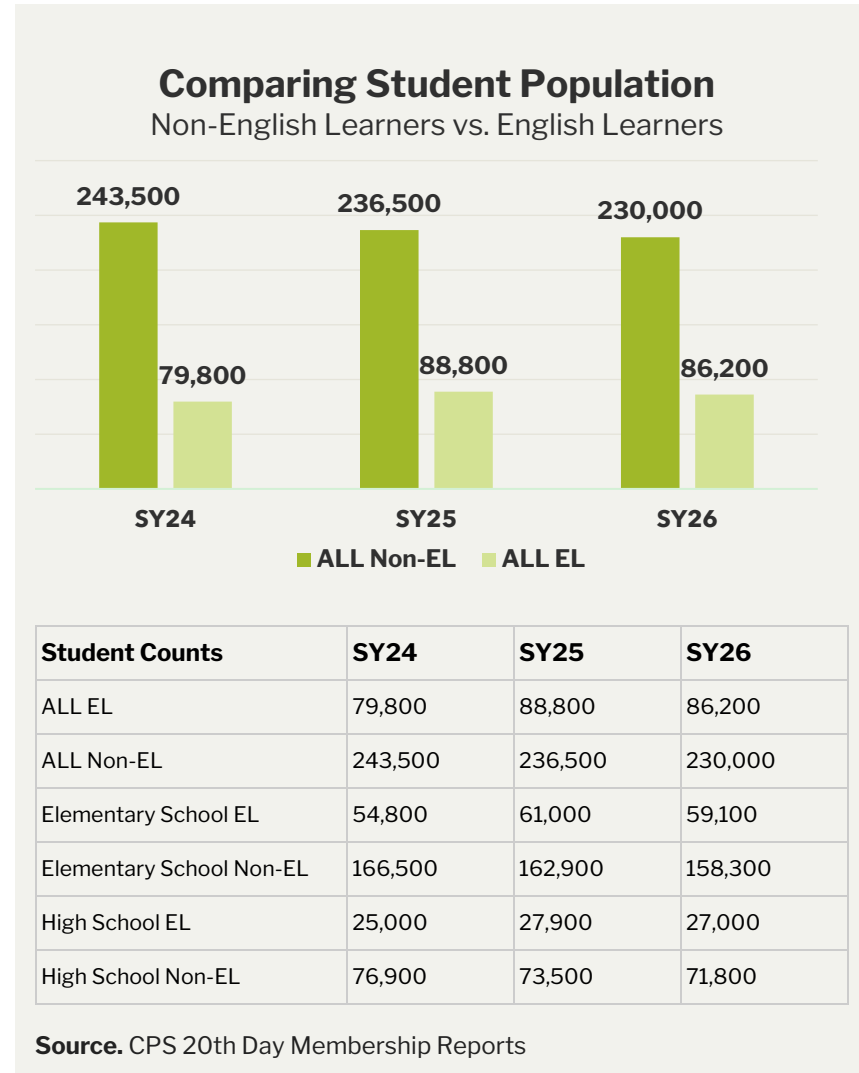
What Fall Attendance Data Tell Us

Kids First Chicago analyzed weekly attendance for SY24, SY25, and SY26 (to date). To estimate the impact of the fall enforcement surge, we calculated weekly attendance gaps by comparing SY26 attendance to the same weeks in SY24 and SY25 and to the average of SY24 and SY25 specifically for the English Learner (EL) and Non-English Learner subgroups (Non-EL), anticipating that EL students were more likely to be impacted.

- There are roughly 86,000 EL students in SY26.
- There are roughly 230,000 Non-EL students in SY26.

While we reviewed all available weeks, Weeks 4–13 align with the period when Operation Midway Blitz began and intensified, and they show a clear deviation from prior-year attendance patterns.²

"Parents are afraid to take their children to school. But they know that their responsibility as parents is to ensure that their children receive an academic education." –CPS Parent in the Back of the Yards



² Week 4 (beginning September 8, when Operation Midway Blitz was widely reported to have commenced) through Week 13 (mid-November, when visible ICE/CBP presence had substantially diminished).

Attendance for All Students Analyzed Citywide Masks Suppressed EL Student Attendance Throughout Weeks 4-13

There is no noticeable districtwide attendance pattern deviation when comparing SY26 to prior-year averages across all weeks across the city, including during the Weeks 4-13 window.

However, focusing on EL students shows how attendance for specific populations most likely to be impacted by immigration actions was deeply affected, in particular across Weeks 4-13. An attendance gap for EL students emerged and remained elevated across multiple consecutive weeks during the enforcement period.

- EL attendance in SY26 deviated significantly from prior-year averages for the entire enforcement window for both elementary and high school students. This drop was more pronounced for high school EL students.
- The largest single-week gaps occurred in Weeks 7 and 8.
 - In Week 7, EL attendance was approximately 3-4 percentage points below the same-week average from SY24 and SY25 for both elementary and high school. Based on EL enrollment in SY26, that gap translates to **more than 3,000 EL students** who would typically have been in school staying home that week.
 - Week 8 showed a similarly elevated gap before gradual improvement for elementary students in the following weeks. High school EL student attendance continued to lag significantly when compared to prior years.

In Week 7 alone, more than 3,000 English Learner students who would normally be in class were missing.

Figure 1. English Learner Attendance Fell Below Historical Norms During Weeks 4-13

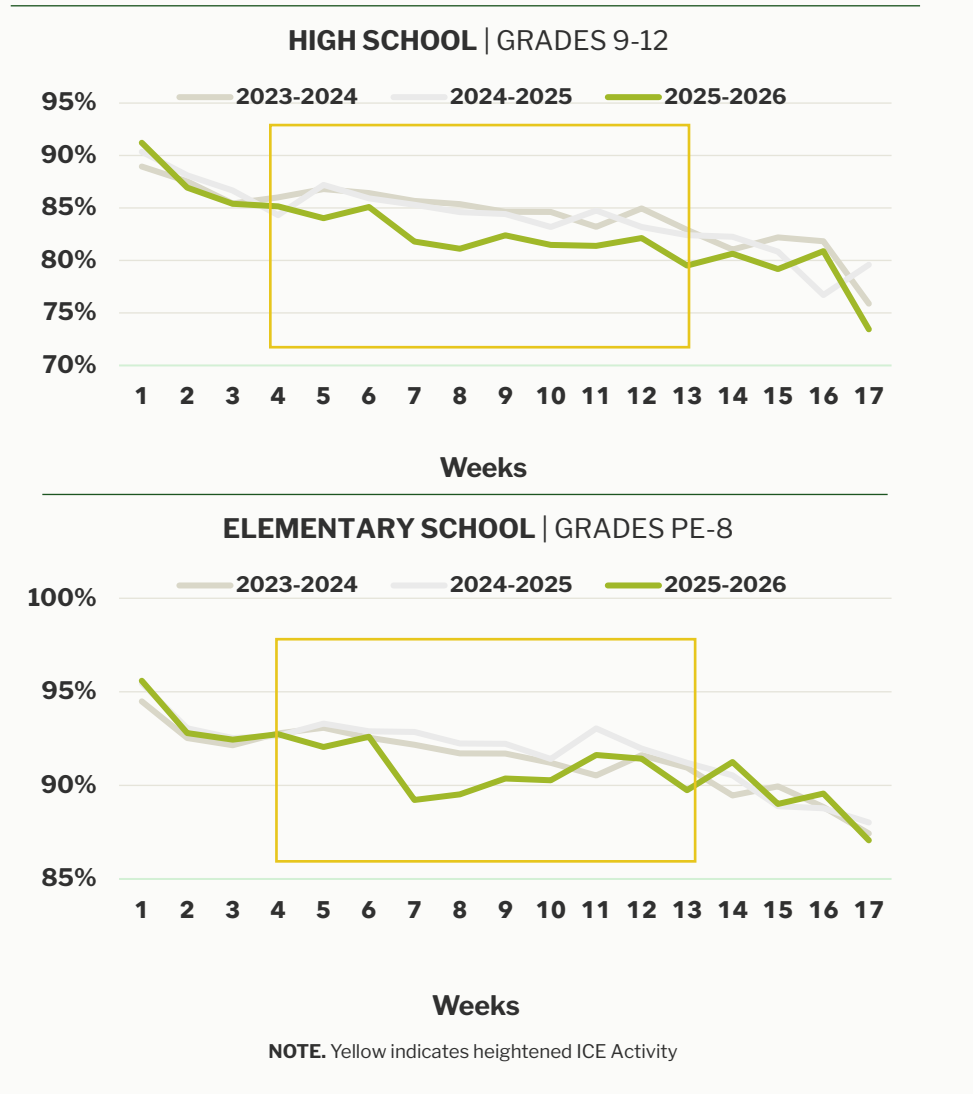
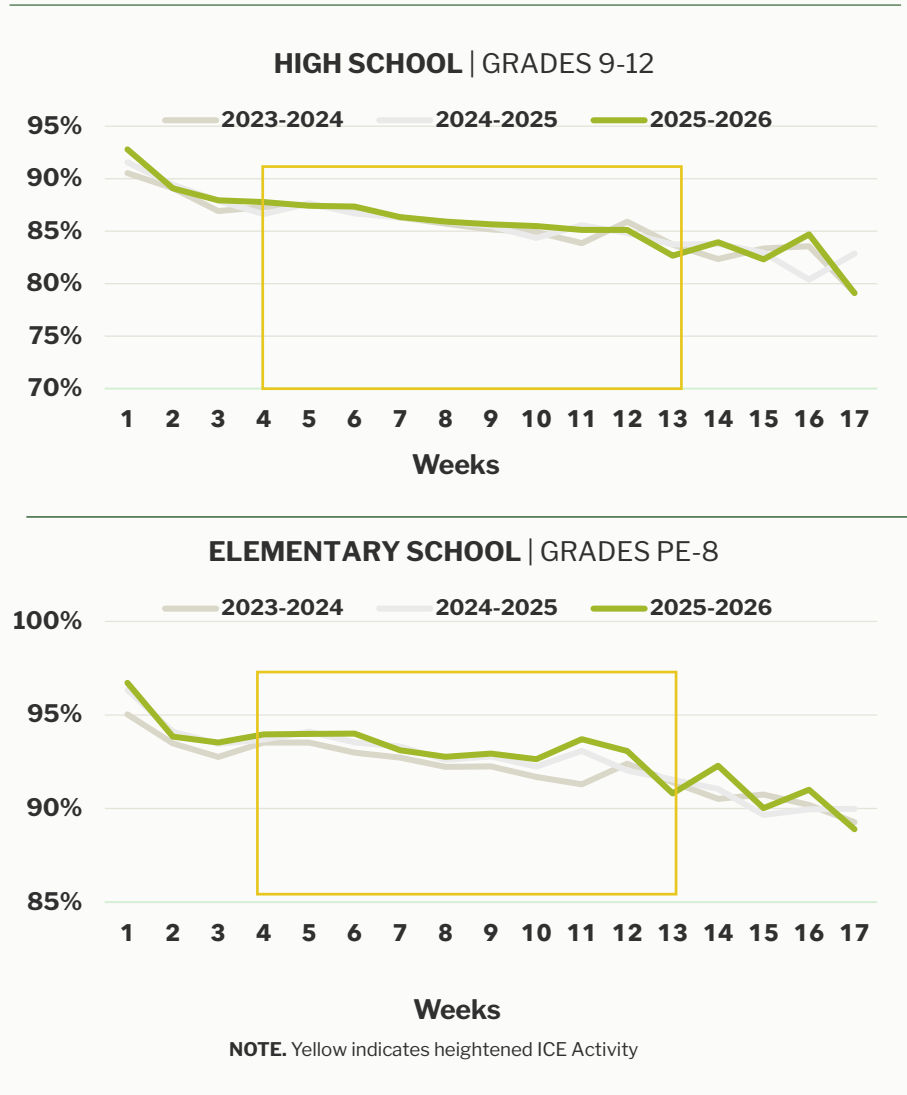


Figure 2. Non-EL Attendance During Weeks 1-17



By comparison, SY26 Non-EL attendance during these weeks looks similar or slightly higher versus prior years.

Attendance Losses Clustered in Specific Areas of the City

Atypical attendance declines become more evident when analyzing attendance by region rather than citywide. The impacted regions align with enrolled student populations most likely to have been targeted by immigration actions. During Weeks 4–13, the largest gaps (SY26 relative to the same-week SY24–SY25 average) clustered in a subset of CPS Annual Regional Analysis (ARA) regions.

The regions with the most sustained or pronounced declines during the enforcement window included:

- Greater Stockyards (Brighton Park, McKinley Park)
- Pilsen / Little Village
- Greater Midway (Archer Heights, Chicago Lawn, Gage Park)

Several of these regions experienced significant single-week drops during periods of heavy immigration enforcement activities. For example:

- Greater Stockyards saw its largest drop in Week 7 (approximately -2.5 percentage points) relative to prior-year averages. Approximately 9 out of 10 enrolled students in this region are Latine and/or Asian.
- Pilsen/Little Village also experienced a significant Week 10 decline (approximately -2.5 percentage points). More than 9 out of 10 students enrolled in this region are Latine.
- Greater Midway experienced a pronounced Week 7 decline (approximately -1.5 percentage points). More than 9 out of 10 students enrolled in this region are Latine and/or Black.

“In Greater Stockyards and Pilsen / Little Village, roughly 1 in 40 students who would normally be present were absent during the peak enforcement window—the equivalent of nearly two average-sized elementary schools sitting empty.”

In several of these regions, attendance remained below prior-year norms across multiple consecutive weeks during the enforcement window. After Week 13, attendance in many regions moved closer to prior-year patterns, suggesting the disruptions were associated with the enforcement-period conditions rather than a broader, citywide attendance shift.

The fall data show that attendance declines were both acute (in shock weeks) and sustained (across the full enforcement period). These patterns provide a baseline for understanding how future enforcement activity could affect attendance if similar conditions arise again.

These data further confirmed the targeted nature of enforcement actions and the need for communities to have access to real-time, transparent attendance data to better support their student populations.

Why These Attendance Losses Matter

Attendance is foundational to learning and student well-being. Even short periods of absence reduce instructional time and disrupt access to meals, services, and routines that help children feel secure, especially while CPS is still recovering from post-pandemic attendance and achievement challenges. When absences become sustained, the consequences compound for grades, on-track indicators, and graduation.

How Communities Responded

During the fall surge, families and community organizations stepped in when systems did not. Parents formed walking school buses and carpools. Schools conducted wellness checks and sent materials home. Community-based organizations monitored streets, shared information, and reassured families as best they could.

These responses were resourceful and necessary, but they were uneven and often built on fragile volunteer networks. Many received little to no funding and will be difficult to sustain without coordination and support.

Chicago has a narrow window to prepare so families are not left improvising again.

Immigration enforcement actions during the peak of Operation Midway Blitz caused CPS students to miss more than 100,000 hours of classroom instruction during one week alone.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What Chicago Must Do Now

The following recommendations come from extensive conversations with CPS families and community partners. They focus on steps CPS, the City, and community partners can put in place now so support can scale quickly and consistently if enforcement intensifies again.

01 Prioritize and Prepare High-Risk Communities

The City and CPS should immediately focus preparation efforts in neighborhoods that experienced the greatest attendance disruptions in the fall. Using existing priority community designations and neighborhood networks, CPS can identify where supports must be built out first and ensure resources are deployed proactively rather than reactively.

Within these communities:

- Schools should assign a visible “arrival/dismissal lead” and a small rotating team to maintain consistent perimeter coverage during arrival and dismissal, with a clear protocol for escalating concerns and communicating with families.
- CPS and the City should provide weekly districtwide and regional absenteeism reporting—disaggregated by English Learner (EL) status and grade level—to support real-time coordination and resource alignment, while avoiding school- or neighborhood-level reporting that could stigmatize communities.

- All principals and designated school-based response leads in prioritized communities should complete rapid-response training before spring, including: (1) who makes decisions, (2) how staff communicate internally, (3) how families are notified, and (4) what staff should do if enforcement activity occurs near school property.
- Schools should develop individualized safety plans for students whose families express heightened concern. These plans may include designated arrival contacts, alternate entry procedures, coordinated carpools, pre-identified safe meeting points, or limited short-term academic flexibility during temporary disruptions.
- Schools should retain flexibility to adjust tactics based on local conditions, but should follow a common CPS framework so families receive consistent guidance across schools.

This early prioritization ensures that supports reach students most likely to experience attendance interruptions if another surge occurs, and that schools are equipped with clear plans before fear escalates.

02 Build School-Based Sanctuary Teams

During the fall surge, families needed clear points of contact, coordinated support, and consistent communication when the commute to school felt unsafe. In many cases, schools and parents improvised these structures. To prepare for spring, CPS should formalize that work by establishing School-Based Sanctuary Teams in every school that experienced immigration-related attendance disruptions.

Staff Sanctuary Team

Each school should designate a staff lead responsible for coordinating planning, communication, and partnerships. In schools with existing Whole School Safety Committees, those structures should be leveraged to anchor this work rather than creating duplicative teams.

The Staff Sanctuary Team should:

- Serve as the primary point of contact for families seeking guidance or reassurance.
- Coordinate across Safe Passage partners, Safe Havens, Community Schools, Parent Mentor programs, after-school providers, nearby faith-based institutions, and local CBOs.
- Set up a two-way communication protocol (multilingual, with secure options as appropriate) and maintain an updated “safety directory” that includes key contacts, safe locations, carpool/escort options, and an emergency contact tree.
- Monitor attendance patterns and student needs weekly and adjust supports—escort coverage, communication, and partner coordination—based on changes in conditions.

“Families wanted a trusted person to give rides to their kids.” — Partner in Minneapolis

Communication should come from someone families already know and trust—not a new contact introduced during a crisis. Schools should identify staff and parent leads in advance so they can build relationships with families.

Parent Action Team

Parents and caregivers were central to the fall response—organizing walking groups, monitoring routes, and sharing real-time updates. These efforts should be formalized into Parent Action Teams that operate in partnership with the Staff Sanctuary Team.

Parent Action Teams should:

- Recruit parent/caregiver/community volunteers early on.
- Identify families requesting commute support and match them to available supports ([walking school buses](#), carpools, safe meeting points).
- Coordinate arrival/dismissal coverage with the Staff Sanctuary Team so families get one consistent plan.
- Integrate Parent Mentors and trusted parent leaders as designated outreach leads for multilingual communication and family follow-up.

Together, Staff Sanctuary Teams and Parent Action Teams can ensure that families are not navigating safety decisions alone and that supports can be activated quickly and consistently before a crisis escalates.

03 Strengthen Safe Passage and Expand Community Safety Coverage

The fall made clear that consistent, visible adult presence along student routes is essential. [Safe Passage](#) already provides a foundation for this work, but recent funding reductions shortened coverage windows and limited flexibility just as enforcement activity intensified. Preparing for the spring requires restoring baseline capacity and building targeted surge capacity in neighborhoods most at risk.

"In my community, I've seen that they come out to the corners, it's time to leave, it's 2:30, and the students are leaving. The principals are one block away from their school, and the teachers are there to support them, making sure everything is okay outside. So, I think that makes you feel good as a parent, knowing that your school is supporting you so that you can come and go safely."—CPS Parent in Gage Park

To Prepare

- Create surge capacity by allowing temporary add-ons (additional Safe Passage staff hours, school-based perimeter staffing, and trained parent support) during elevated enforcement periods.
- Standardize training for Safe Passage personnel and surge supports, including radio use, deescalation, communication protocols, clear role boundaries, and Know Your Rights awareness so staff understand what they can and cannot do during enforcement-related situations.
- Pilot targeted transportation supports (limited shuttles, vans coordinated through trusted CBOs, or expanded bus routing) in places where walking routes are unsafe or impractical during surge periods. Schools need pre-authorization and budget flexibility to act quickly and flexibly to address transportation needs.

By reinforcing and modernizing Safe Passage now, CPS can avoid the reactive, uneven responses that characterized the fall and instead deploy consistent, predictable supports in the communities that need them most.

04 Establish Safe Routes and Coordinate a Citywide Safe Haven Network

Chicago should publish safe routes and designate safe havens with consistent standards so families know where students can go and who is responsible for support.

Designate and Map Safe Routes

- Create simple route maps for prioritized school communities that identify recommended travel corridors and safe-haven locations; distribute in print and digitally in multiple languages.
- Use School Safety Committees, Sanctuary Teams, and CBO partners to validate routes and update them as conditions change.
- For elementary students, establish optional group travel plans (walking school buses or meeting-point escorts) coordinated through Sanctuary Teams.

Routes should be reviewed regularly and adjusted based on community conditions.

Formalize Safe Haven Standards

Safe havens should meet consistent, citywide criteria so families know what to expect. At a minimum, designated safe havens should include:

- Visible signage identifying the location as a youth safe haven.
- A designated staff point of contact during school arrival and dismissal windows.
- Clear supervision protocols outlining what staff will and will not do.
- Basic guidance on appropriate response procedures if enforcement activity occurs nearby.
- Secure commitments up front from local businesses and partners to serve as safe havens.

Local businesses, faith institutions, and community organizations located along designated routes should be invited to participate voluntarily as allies. Participation should be accompanied by simple guidance and visible signage to avoid confusion or misinformation.

Clarify and Coordinate City Agency Roles

City agencies must have clearly defined and publicly communicated responsibilities:

- **Chicago Police Department (CPD):** The City should publish clear guidance on what CPD will and will not do in school-adjacent contexts during commute windows, including how City ordinances governing interaction with federal immigration authorities apply.
- **Chicago Fire Department:** Designate fire stations as official youth safe havens during school commute hours.
- **Chicago Park District:** Identify and clearly mark fieldhouses as safe spaces where students can seek assistance.
- **Chicago Public Library:** Make library branches accessible, visible safe havens during school commute periods.
- **Chicago Transit Authority:** Provide free transit for CPS students with a valid school ID during designated enforcement surge periods to reduce transportation barriers.

Agency coordination should be centralized, with clear interdepartmental communication so that responsibilities do not fall unevenly on schools.

Improve School and Adjacent Parking Safety

Arrival and dismissal areas should be visibly structured and clearly defined:

- Install clear signage and temporary traffic controls (cones, barriers, or similar devices) at CPS parking lots and designated safe-haven sites to mark protected zones.
- Designate supervised pick-up areas at schools and, where feasible, in nearby private lots.
- Ensure these areas are visibly monitored during arrival and dismissal windows.

Clear physical structure reduces confusion, reinforces expectations, and signals to families that student safety is being taken seriously.

EXAMPLE SAFE PASSAGE MAP



05 Ensure Academic Continuity and Mental-Health Support During Disruptions

CPS should prepare now so students can stay connected to learning and supports during possible immigration enforcement surge periods—without returning to systemwide remote learning.

Strengthen Mental-Health Supports for Students, Families, and Staff

Students experiencing enforcement-related disruption may show increased anxiety, withdrawal, absenteeism, or academic decline. Schools should proactively expand trauma-informed supports so that students are met with stability rather than silence.

"Many of the children are afraid, and they show it when they arrive at school. They tell their parents, "Go now, go home, and I'll wait for you here."

—CPS Parent in Gage Park

Schools Should:

- Offer short-term drop-in support (virtual or in-person) with counselors/social workers during surge periods.
- Provide brief bridge counseling for students returning after extended absences or family disruption.
- Train designated school staff and key volunteers in Mental Health First Aid and trauma-informed response.
- Set up referral pathways for caregivers to free/low-cost counseling through trusted providers, and offer facilitated parent support circles where demand exists.
- Ensure school-based staff have access to support during sustained surge periods to prevent burnout.

Because student well-being is inseparable from family stability, supports should extend beyond students. All partners should recognize that mental health and academic recovery take time, so supports must be ongoing.

Maintain Academic Continuity Without Returning to Systemwide Remote Learning

CPS should issue district guidance that allows limited, short-term remote access on a case-by-case basis when a documented safety risk exists. The goal is temporary continuity—not a separate instructional track.

Schools should provide:

- Assignments and recorded instruction
- Optional livestream access where feasible
- Digital work submission and teacher feedback
- Short-term tutoring or homebound-style supports when needed
- A clear re-entry plan so students transition back smoothly

CPS should also confirm device inventory readiness and hotspot access protocols in advance so that temporary remote access is not limited by connectivity gaps.

For older students, schools should provide proactive guidance on graduation requirements, financial aid timelines, and postsecondary planning to prevent enforcement-related absences from derailing long-term plans.

The appendix details how partners can work together to implement these recommendations as well as estimated costs to implement.

kidsfirstchicago.org/safepassage

Address Families' Basic Needs

Too often, we rely on our public schools to help address families' basic needs and, in the most dire situations, to provide humanitarian relief. This is inadequate. We know that fear-related absences often intersect with economic disruption. Schools need trusted partners to deliver humanitarian relief. To that end, schools need clear referral pathways from the city to city agencies and community partners to provide:

- Food assistance for families
- Emergency financial assistance for families who temporarily lose income
- Coordination with community-based organizations that can provide direct support or connect families to city services

When families' basic needs are stabilized, academic continuity becomes far more realistic.

"I may be tired, I may even be sick, but they have to go to school because that is where they will learn, where they will make a difference, and where they will continue on their path to a successful future."

- CPS Parent in Back of the Yards

CONCLUSION

These recommendations are grounded in the experiences of CPS families and community partners who navigated the fall surge, along with insights from national partners—including advocates in Minneapolis—who have confronted similar challenges. We are deeply grateful to Kids First Chicago's Community Engagement team and to the many partners who helped shape these recommendations, including members of the Coalition for Authentic Community Engagement.

About the Coalition for Authentic Community Engagement


The Coalition for Authentic Community Engagement is a coalition of more than two dozen direct-service nonprofit organizations and school affiliates representing thousands of Chicagoans. We formed around the belief that Chicago Public Schools (CPS) policy decisions can be made that authentically incorporate the voices and views of those who will be directly impacted, in particular the families and students served by CPS. Visit authenticengagement.info.

About Kids First Chicago

Kids First Chicago's mission is to dramatically improve education for Chicago's children by ensuring their families are the respected authorities on what their kids need and decision-makers in their kids' education. We do this by partnering with families to support them in gaining the resources, access, and voice they need to achieve their vision for their children. We also provide transparent and rigorous education analysis to families, educators, and policymakers alike to inform data-driven and inclusive decision-making about the future of Chicago's public schools. Visit kidsfirstchicago.org.

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KEY PARTNERS



Coalition for Authentic Community Engagement (CACE)

30+ local organizations advancing community voice in CPS policymaking.