



**MEDIA ADVISORY  
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**How Immigration Enforcement Became a School Attendance Crisis in Chicago**

*A new report urges the City and CPS to better prepare to protect student learning during federal immigration enforcement*

Chicago, IL – Today, the Coalition for Authentic Community Engagement and Kids First Chicago (K1C) released a new report, [Protecting Student Learning in the Era of Immigration Enforcement](#). The report lays out recommendations to ensure students can get safely to and from school amid a new era of federal immigration enforcement.

“The 2025 federal immigration enforcement actions were unlike anything Chicago had experienced,” said Daniel Anello, CEO of Kids First Chicago. “For thousands of children and families, even getting to and from school felt uncertain and unsafe. It’s heartbreaking that students of all backgrounds—who have a constitutional right to an education—are missing out on learning because of fear.”

**What the Data Show**

To assess the impact that immigration enforcement activities had on school attendance, Kids First Chicago analyzed weekly CPS attendance for Weeks 1–17 in SY24, SY25, and SY26. To estimate the effect of this fall’s enforcement surge, the authors compared SY26 attendance to the same weeks in SY24 and SY25—and to their two-year average, establishing a clear baseline to measure changes that follow. They focused on English Learner (EL) and Non-English Learner (Non-EL) students, given the heightened risk of impact for them.

**Data Highlights**

- In SY26, Weeks 4–13 coincided with the launch and escalation of Operation Midway Blitz in Chicago. During this period, English Learner attendance diverged sharply from prior-year trends at both the elementary and high school levels, with steeper declines among high school EL students. In Week 7 alone, more than 3,000 English Learner students who would normally be in class were absent, resulting in more than 100,000 hours of lost classroom instruction in a single week due to immigration enforcement actions.
- After the operation began, 38 of Chicago’s 77 community areas saw attendance drops greater than the district average. About 40% of those areas have large immigrant or Latine populations.
- On September 29, 2025—the Monday after visible federal enforcement activity downtown—nearly 14,000 students at predominantly Latine schools were absent, representing about 12% of enrollment at those schools.
- The most sustained and pronounced attendance declines occurred in Brighton Park, McKinley Park, Pilsen, Little Village, Archer Heights, Chicago Lawn, and Gage Park. In these communities, roughly 1 in 40 students who would normally be in class were absent during the

peak enforcement period—the equivalent of nearly two average-sized elementary schools sitting empty.

### **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.

“Families and community organizations stepped into action in critical ways—organizing walking school buses, carpools, and neighborhood watch efforts,” said Jessica Cañas, Chief of Community Engagement at Kids First Chicago. “The fall made it clear that when systems are not in place, communities and schools improvise, but alignment between these groups and public institutions would allow for even more families to be reached. Too many students still stayed home.”

With federal officials signaling plans to return to Chicago in the spring, the Coalition for Authentic Community Engagement and Kids First Chicago have curated a set of recommendations to build **readiness now** using existing programs and partnerships so schools and communities can respond quickly and consistently if enforcement intensifies again.

### **Recommendations to Implement Now**

#### **1. Prioritize and Prepare High-Risk Communities**

CPS and the City should focus immediate preparation in neighborhoods that experienced the largest fall attendance disruptions. Strategies should include strengthening arrival/dismissal coverage, publishing weekly districtwide and regional absenteeism reports 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 paired Parent Action Teams and Whole School Safety Committees where they exist. 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. Expansions could include 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.

Kids First Chicago will host a virtual lunch-hour briefing on Thursday, March 11, 12:00 to 1:00 pm, to share the recommendations and discuss next steps. **Members of the media and public are welcome to attend.**

#### **Virtual Partners Briefing**

*Protecting Student Learning in the Era of Immigration Enforcement*

Wednesday, March 11, 2026, 12-1 pm (English only)

[Register here >](#)

The briefing will highlight the report's key findings and explore what they mean for families and schools. Confirmed speakers include:

- Ana Lorenzana, Senior Manager of Community Engagement for the Parent Mentor Program at the Northwest Center
- Marlon Henriquez, Principal of Gunsaulus Scholastic Academy

Read the full report at [kidsfirstchicago.org/safepassage](https://kidsfirstchicago.org/safepassage).

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#### **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](https://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. K1C provides 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](https://kidsfirstchicago.org).