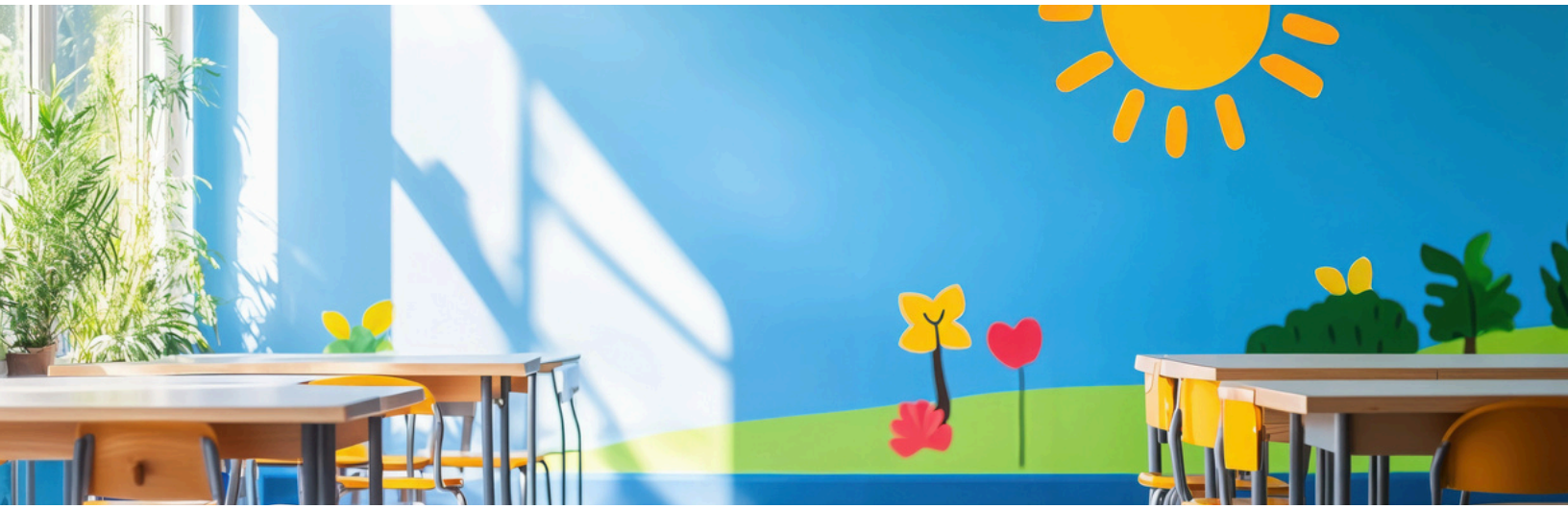
2025 EARLY LEARNER ATTENDANCE BRIEF

LATINO TK/KINDERGARTEN ATTENDANCE UNDER PRESSURE IN CALIFORNIA



BY MONIQUE ESCOBEDO, PH.D.

Ensuring quality education for TK–12 students remains a shared priority, but the COVID-19 pandemic caused protracted declines in attendance and a surge in chronic absenteeism, i.e. students who miss 10% or more of instructional days per year.[1] In California, rates rose from 12% in 2018–19 to 30% in 2021–22[2] and remain high, particularly among socioeconomically disadvantaged[3] students and Students of Color.[4] For TK and kindergarten students in these groups, inconsistent attendance poses heightened academic risks, threatening early learning outcomes and social-emotional development.[5]

Recent federal immigration enforcement and rhetoric have intensified fears in immigrant communities, especially among Latinos, a demographic that comprises over half of California's TK–12 students.[6] Following a 2025 Executive Order,[7] aggressive and often racially motivated ICE operations have been linked to a 22% rise in absences among young children from mixed-status or undocumented families in California's Central Valley.[8] Caregivers[9] from three California regions, including the Central Valley, participated in a series of focus groups and shared how federal efforts to enforce immigration have negatively, and in many cases traumatically, impacted their lives and the lives of their children. Participants reported protracted periods of self-isolation by avoiding mundane activities such as grocery shopping and recreational activities such as taking their children to the park. In some cases, participants shared that they kept their children home from school due to fear of racial targeting and legal separation. These pressures contributed to mental health challenges, mistrust of authorities, and isolation, while limiting awareness of legal rights. Caregivers emphasized the need for schools and communities to provide clear information, culturally responsive support, and safe, welcoming environments so all children can attend school consistently, without fear or interruption.

Note: Footnotes for this article are provided on the final page of this brief.

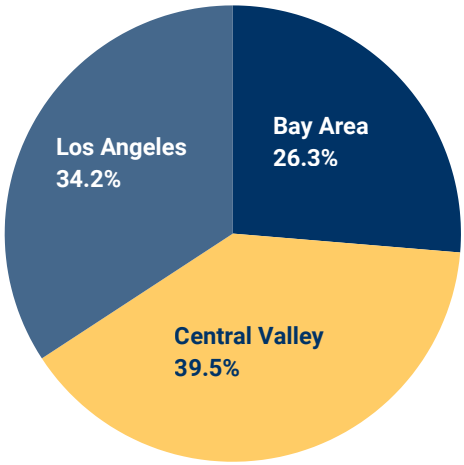
STUDY PURPOSE AND METHODS

To understand how current political conditions shape attendance among Latino TK and kindergarten students, the Parent Institute for Quality Education (PIQE) conducted **six virtual focus groups** across the **Bay Area, Central Valley, and Los Angeles (see Figure 1)**. Participants were Latina/o and/or Indigenous caregivers with cultural roots in Mexico, Central, or South America, each with at least one TK or kindergarten child enrolled during 2024–25.

ABSENTEEISM TRENDS

Most caregivers reported 0–3 absences per year **(Figure 2),** showing strong commitment to attendance despite ongoing threats. Yet immigration-related absences remained significant —approximately 21% cited either enforcement fears and/or immigration court obligations **(Figure 3).** Non-immigration factors included short-term illness (84%), medical appointments (36%), and family emergencies (11%), along with transportation and work schedules **(Figure 4).**

Figure 1 - Caregiver Region



CAREGIVER DEMOGRAPHICS AT A GLANCE[10]

- **Gender:** 92% female
- **Ethnicity/Language:** 95% Hispanic/Latina/o/x; most spoke Spanish at home; 5% identified as Indigenous with Mixtec as a primary language
- **Children's Language Status:** Over 80% had at least one English learner
- **Education:** Over half (~55%) completed education through elementary or middle school; 31.6% completed high school
- **Income:** Over half (~53%) earned under $40,000 annually

Figure 2 - Absence Frequency

In the last 12 months, how many days was your child absent from school for the full day?

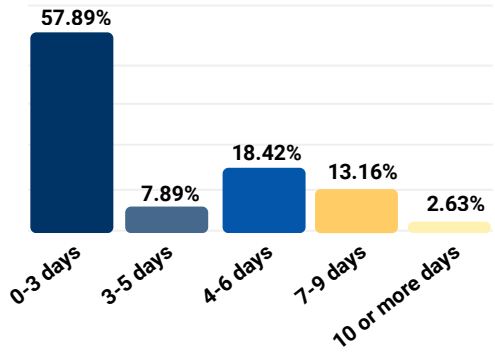
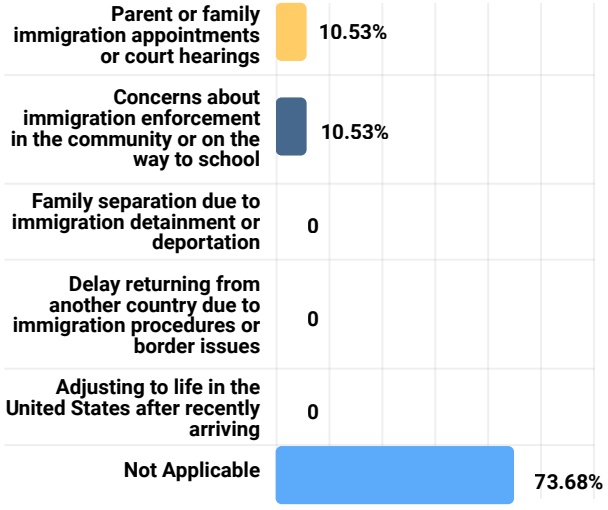


Figure 3 - Absences Related to Immigration

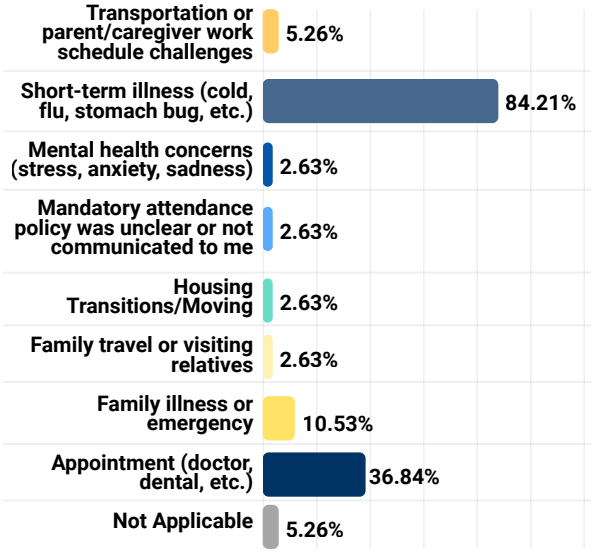
In the last 12 months, was your child absent for any of the following reasons related to immigrantion?



The remaining 5.26% pertained to the "Other" option, however, this was excluded because the responses did not respond to the immigration aspect of the question.

Figure 4 - Absences Unrelated to Immigration

Please select any additional reasons yourchild was absent from school over the last 12 months.



Testimonies presented here are English translations of comments originally shared in Spanish. Original Spanish versions can be found in the full report.

KEY FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS

Across all regions, caregivers—regardless of immigration status—described deep emotional strain and anxiety tied to ICE enforcement activities that disrupted school attendance for some households and social-emotional wellbeing for many, including children. Four main themes from participant contributions across all three regions were noted. Additional findings specific to the respective regions are also included following the main themes. Psuedonyms are used to protect the privacy and confidentiality of each participant and their children.

Theme 1: Children's Mental Health and Emotional Distress:

Fear of family separation led to trauma, reluctance to attend school, and confusion or sadness for some children.

For me, it was because of my children's fear — about what was going to happen to them. I wasn't prepared to leave any documents or for them to have passports. So that fear turned into panic for me. Unfortunately, I affected my little girl because she didn't get to finish the school year with her friends...she would say that I was the one — that I didn't want to take her to school. She would tell me, "Mom, I want to go to school, I want to be with my teacher." And I would tell her, "Sweetie, we can't," or "I can't." So all through the vacation she kept saying that she wanted to go to school, that she missed school. She didn't get that closure — saying goodbye to her friends, hearing her teacher say, "We're going on a break, we'll come back next year," or anything like that unfortunately.

Estela, Los Angeles

We're not here [in the United States] legally, and we have an ongoing [legal] process. Well, at a certain point, even at school, they would scare my children, and my son would say, "I don't want to go because they're going to take me and separate me from you." And I told him, "No—don't worry, nothing's going to happen to you at school, and if something does happen, then I'll go with you." But yes, my children spent a long time like that — afraid that they were going to be taken away and separated from me.

Vanesa, Central Valley

It really affected both my daughter and my son because they felt sad for the other kids since many children were missing school, a lot of them weren't going to school.

Belinda, Los Angeles

Theme 2: Mistrust of Information and Law Enforcement:

Rumors and misinformation often spread through social media and perceived increases of inconspicuous ICE presence around schools fueled avoidance behaviors and mistrust.

I know a place that's a federal building—I don't know what problems they were having. The thing is, it was full of National Guard members, and then people started making videos and posting that immigration agents were there taking people away, even though the guards were just watching over the place. Then another video came out from the same place saying that people were being taken away there, which wasn't true...Thank God, we never, ever saw anything happen.

Noelia, Los Angeles

I have residency, right? But honestly, I was seeing all of that happening. My kids didn't miss school because of it, but I tried to make sure they didn't go out to the street at all, because I was scared that they might get frightened. And I would think, well, imagine, if I'm scared and I have legal status, I can only imagine how people without papers must feel. Poor people, and the trauma their children carry because of that. It really did worry me a lot here in this state, honestly. In fact, I had to go to Mexico [for the whole summer], and we went there so [the kids] could go out freely and feel at ease.

Belinda, Los Angeles

And at school, whenever they heard or saw a police car, the other kids would start saying, "Immigration is coming," or something like that. And then my kids would get scared — he was really little — he didn't even want to go out for recess. The teacher would call me and say, "Look, Fernando is crying and wants to go home." That happened a couple of times, and I went to pick him up and took him home.

Vanesa, Central Valley

Theme 3: Preparedness and Protective Strategies:

Many families limited public activities, created guardianship letters, and rehearsed safety plans, thereby showing caution, agency, and resilience. Schools were often key in providing information, legal resources, and offering schools as a sanctuary.

We say, well, if they send me back, then they send me back. That's not the real problem. The problem is my children — I didn't know how to protect them or how to make sure someone would take responsibility for them...until one day, I asked about it. Someone told me there's a letter I could write, so I did it. In that sense, I prepared myself for whatever might happen. Right now, I have everything ready — passports, the letter — and I feel a little more secure because my oldest daughter is 15, and I've already explained to her more or less what to do [if I get detained]. So now I feel a bit calmer and able to start my normal activities again, like before — keeping my kids active, taking them to school, going back and forth — but I do it with caution. It's not like before, when we'd just say, "Oh, let's go!" or "Let's go here or there." Now, we go out cautiously.

Teresa, Los Angeles

Even the schools held meetings for us. The topic was discussed a lot at schools. In fact, local police came to explain that we shouldn't be afraid, that they were there to help us, not to harm us, and the principal also held many meetings about this.

Eva, Bay Area

In the case of my daughter's school, they also send messages telling parents not to be afraid and offering support. They also hold immigration workshops.

Margarita, Central Valley

At our school, they only notified us that they would protect the children from anything at school in case ICE came, and that the children would be kept safe — so we didn't need to worry. They also offered counseling services, or if anyone needed to talk about anything, they could go to the counselor. We were given red cards, so we didn't have to answer questions if ICE came to the house, and there were also red cards for the kids. Besides keeping the children safe, some schools offered informational talks about immigration.

Belinda, Los Angeles

Theme 4: Caregivers' Courage, Sacrifice, and Commitment to Opportunity:

Despite adversity, caregivers remained steadfast in prioritizing education, seeing it as a path to safety and opportunity for their children.

For me personally, it's about the future of my children. Their future. I believe this country offers many benefits — a lot of education, really — and one is grateful for that. That's the reality. In our home country, it might be possible, but it's a bit more difficult to provide an education for our children. I think that if we adapt, it's possible, but we came to this country because there are opportunities here.

Teresa, Los Angeles

Well, the joy I get is seeing my daughter go to school, learning so that one day she can achieve her dreams and become someone in life. And also the hope that all this will end so that everyone can go out freely, be safe, carry out their daily tasks without fear, without worries, and feel more at ease.

Enrique, Central Valley

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Central Valley:

- Caregivers frequently linked absences to ICE raids and immigration court dates.
- Economic and transportation challenges added to stress, including:
  - Car breakdowns
  - Long distances to bus stops
  - Conflicting work schedules
- Some schools provided legal rights information and counseling, but attendance policies were applied inconsistently.
- Caregivers emphasized the need for:
  - Resources in Spanish
  - More English Language Development (ELD) support
  - A more welcoming school environment
- Central Valley caregivers were the least informed about attendance policies.
- They called for multilingual school meetings to better understand the importance of TK and kindergarten attendance.
- Caregivers stressed the need for before- and after-school care to accommodate varying work schedules.

As a parent, yes, I care, but at school, no — at least that's how I feel for my daughter's school — I feel like they're not giving it much importance. I don't know, the teacher doesn't even speak Spanish, so right now, there haven't been any communications or meetings offered to us. Nothing.

Tania, regarding the current ICE situation

I had to ask, I had to find out what time they start and what time they finish because they just received my child and said, "Bye-bye," and that was it. But I'm new [to the U.S.]. I said, "Oh, you have to tell me about this. Am I going to get any notice when there are meetings or something?" No, nothing. They left me completely in the dark. I can ask questions — it's up to me to go — but when I did, nobody spoke Spanish. None of them.

Beatriz, a newcomer to the U.S. trying to learn about school procedures

Honestly, it's been difficult for me sometimes because I don't drive. I haven't been here [in the U.S.] long, and it's been hard, like when I work and my son gets out of school.

Vanesa, a newcomer to the U.S. balancing work and school schedules without a car

Well, I could say it would help if they held a meeting to let parents know the importance of children attending school. I've overheard a lot of conversations and heard from many moms who sometimes say, "Oh, I bring them, but they're only there for a few hours." They don't understand that it's for learning, not just for childcare. It's really for your children to advance [academically], and it would be good if they held a meeting or a talk to let parents know the importance of attendance in TK and kindergarten.

Adela, calling on schools to help newcomers understand that TK and Kindergarten are mandatory, and not simply for daycare

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Los Angeles:

- Caregivers reported visible fear around rumors of ICE presence near schools.
- Preparedness strategies included:
  - Notarized guardianship letters
  - Passports
  - Safer transportation options such as rideshares
- Parents relied heavily on faith and family bonds for resilience
- Schools played dual roles:
  - Some provided reassurance through counseling and clear communication
  - Others left caregivers unsupported due to poor translation or inconsistent messaging
- Many participants noted a lack of school bus availability and desired this option to help with:
  - Competing school start times for households with multiple children
  - Conflicting work schedules
  - Walking to school in inclement weather
  - Households with only one personal vehicle
- Caregivers highlighted the need for more ancillary staff in TK and kindergarten classrooms to support teachers who can appear overwhelmed or short on patience.

We tried to talk about the topic, but always calmly. I think that was the best way we handled it. As I keep saying, we entrust ourselves to God, and if it [deportation] happens, it happens. What can we do, right? Because sometimes it might not happen, and we end up getting sick from the stress of the situation, which is already critical, and we make our children sick too. I also think that was our way of coping with this issue.

Estela, relying on faith for open communication with her children regarding ICE raids

I would look at my children and think, I can't keep them here, I can't have them locked up in four walls. Thank God I have family who would come visit with their kids, so they could go out to play and take a little walk. There was some support for my children, and they could see other kids. But it was hard for me, really. It was very hard.

Teresa, in tears, describing the trauma, guilt, and familial support related to self-isolation during to local ICE raids

Now I have a car to take some of them to school and then go back to drop off the others, but last year there was a time when I didn't have a car, so it was a little difficult. As I told you, I have four children.

Chely, balancing drop off for her four children at different schools

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Bay Area:

- Caregivers reported fewer direct encounters with ICE, but fear persisted through social media and community narratives.
- Non-immigration safety concerns—such as kidnappings, shootings, and distracted drivers—also influenced attendance decisions.
- Several caregivers relied on older siblings or neighbors for drop-off and pick-up.
- Some schools proactively provided constitutional rights information and reassurance, which parents appreciated, even in largely non-immigrant schools.
- School oversight was variable; in one instance, a child went missing after being allowed on a bus without being signed up.
- Parents requested more sensitivity from school leaders regarding work schedules, ensuring timely dismissal so parents could return to work.
- Participants expressed a need for more on-campus homework support.
- For TK and kindergarten students, caregivers emphasized the need for professional development for early learning educators, including:
  - Developmentally appropriate redirection strategies
  - Patience and nurturing techniques
  - Building trust so young learners do not fear teachers or school environments

At work, sometimes I'm not given flexibility, and lately what I do is skip my lunch break...so I can leave at 2:15 to pick up my son. Sometimes the teacher takes a little longer. For me, it's complicated because I have to punch out to pick up my son, and sometimes I get back a little late. The fact that I return a bit late doesn't bother me in terms of being docked 5 or 10 minutes, but for my bosses or my superiors it does cause a little frustration, even though they don't pay me for those minutes.

Ruth, balancing work pressure and dismissal time

I would also like the school staff to be more empathetic with the children, because, for example, kindergarten teachers work with very young kids, and I feel that sometimes they don't have patience. I've seen and heard them yell at the kids, and the children get scared, which takes away their motivation and desire to go to school. Sometimes they wake up not wanting to go for that reason.

Eva, calling for more nurturing teachers for better relationships with TK/Kinder students

CONCLUSION

The focus group findings illustrate how political targeting and immigration enforcement shape attendance for Latino TK and kindergarten students, as seen through the lived experiences of their caregivers. For many families, daily routines are overshadowed by fear introduced by political agendas, compounded by economic and logistical barriers such as transportation, misaligned work schedules, and limited access to affordable childcare. Some children experience emotional distress, while others miss school because caregivers must prioritize safety, stability, or employment over attendance expectations. At the same time, caregivers demonstrate agency and remarkable resilience, engaging children in honest conversations, preparing for emergencies, and relying on networks of faith, family, and neighbors to maintain stability. Protective strategies include ensuring guardianship paperwork is in order, finding creative ways to transport children safely, and advocating for better communication with and from schools.

These findings highlight that attendance challenges cannot be separated from the broader social and emotional contexts in which families live. Schools must approach absenteeism not simply as a logistical issue but as a reflection of systemic barriers and community level experiences, including their fears. Caregivers are calling for clearer guidance on attendance policies, multilingual meetings, and a more welcoming, patient, and supportive early learning environment. Educational leaders, policymakers, and staff have an urgent responsibility to stay attuned to the realities Latino (and all) families face, to ensure that communication and resources are accessible in caregivers' home languages, and to create environments where caregivers feel safe, respected, and supported. Doing so is not only essential to promoting regular attendance for early learners (and all students), it is also a vital step toward preserving trust in public education and disentangling politics from children's right to learn, grow, and thrive.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

HEISING-SIMONS FOUNDATION

We wish to express our gratitude to Heising Simons for their generous support for this project. A special acknowledgment also goes to the brave caregivers who shared their time and their stories for this report.

ABOUT PIQE

The Parent Institute for Quality Education is a national nonprofit that advances educational equity by partnering with schools and communities to strengthen family engagement and support systemic change. PIQE serves more than 35,000 families each year across a network of more than 557 schools in 48 of California's 58 counties, and implements its model in 15 states including New Mexico. Since its founding in 1987, PIQE's programs have supported more than 2.35 million students. PIQE delivers research based, culturally responsive, and multilingual programs that equip caregivers with the knowledge, confidence, and tools needed to support learning at home, navigate complex school systems, and advocate for their children's success. The organization is committed to removing structural barriers that disproportionately impact low income, immigrant, and historically marginalized families. Through its work, PIQE helps districts build more inclusive practices, strengthens trust between families and educators, and promotes equitable opportunities for every student to thrive.

FULL REPORT

To read the full report, go to https://go.piqe.org/4rMWHxi

FOOTNOTES

[1] California Department of Education. (2025, October 30). Chronic Absenteeism Indicator – California School Dashboard and System of Support. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/cm/dashboardchronic.asp
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[6] California Department of Education. (2025). Fingertip facts on education in California [Fact sheet]. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/ceffingertipfacts.asp
[7] The White House. (2025, January 20). Protecting the American people against invasion. https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/protecting-the-american-people-against-invasion/
[8] Dee, T. S. (2025, June). Recent Immigration Raids Increased Student Absences (EdWorkingPaper No. 25-1202). Annenberg Institute at Brown University. https://doi.org/10.26300/a62e-h526
[9] The term ‘caregiver’ is used to recognize that children are cared for by parents as well as extended networks of older relatives and adults. The term ‘parent’ may be used interchangeably at times in the report, and the term ‘families’ is used to encompass parent/caregiver participants, their children, and other relatives in their households.
[10] See full report for full demographics

FULL REPORT
To read the full report, go to https://go.piqe.org/4rMWHxi