2025 EARLY LEARNER ATTENDANCE REPORT

Latino TK/Kindergarten Attendance Under Pressure in California

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Ensuring that TK-12 students receive a quality education is a priority for individuals and institutions alike. The realities that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic, however, created lasting circumstances that severely impacted student attendance rates and greatly increased chronic absences–defined as missing 10 percent or more school days per academic year[1]–including in California where this study took place. This includes excused, unexcused, and/or disciplinary absences, or a combination thereof.[2] To wit, in the 2018–19 academic year, TK-12 students in California were chronically absent at a rate of 12 percent, compared to 30 percent in the 2021–22 academic year.[3] Despite decreases over the last two academic years, chronic absenteeism continues to be a persistent challenge in California, and the reality remains that socioeconomically disadvantaged[4] and/or Students of Color face disproportionate barriers to consistent school attendance.[5] Among TK and kindergarten students who fall into one or both of these categories, the academic risks are even greater, as research shows that early learning lays the foundation for future academic success.[6]

In recent months, expanded immigration enforcement, political rhetoric, and shifting federal policies have deepened fears within immigrant communities. The Latino community, which represents over half of California's TK-12 student population,[7] has borne intensified stress and instability due to racially motivated immigration crackdowns that target them specifically. Notably, the United States Supreme Court recently upheld the use of race and ethnicity as a "relevant factor"[8] in allowing immigration law enforcement officials to stop and question individuals on the basis of a "reasonable suspicion of illegal presence in the United States."[9] These stringent and inherently biased enforcement procedures were mobilized through an Executive Order signed by Donald Trump on January 20th, 2025[10]–the first day of his second presidential term–and have since fueled sweeping Immigration and Customs Enforcement

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[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

[2] Jordan, P. W., & Miller, R. (2017, September 26). *Who's in: Chronic absenteeism under the Every Student Succeeds Act*. FutureEd. https://www.future-ed.org/whos-in-chronic-absenteeism-under-the-every-student-succeeds-act/

[3] Guinan, B., & Hill, L. (2025, March). *Chronic absenteeism in California* (Fact Sheet). Public Policy Institute of California. https://www.ppic.org/publication/chronic-absenteeism-in-california/

[4] Malika, N., Granillo, C., Irani, C., Montgomery, S., & Belliard, J. C. (2021). Chronic absenteeism: Risks and protective factors among low-income, minority children and adolescents. *Journal of School Health*, *91*(12), 1046–1054. https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13096

[5] Yin, A., Márquez Rosales, B., & Willis, D. J. (2024, April 9). *Calls, home visits, counseling help get California students back to school*. EdSource. https://www.edsource.org/2024/calls-home-visits-counseling-help-get-california-students-back-to-school/709068

[6] Bakken, L., Brown, N., & Downing, B. (2017). Early childhood education: The long-term benefits. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, *31*(2), 255–269. https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2016.1273285

[7] California Department of Education. (2025). *Fingertip facts on education in California* [Fact sheet]. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/ceffingertipfacts.asp

[8] Supreme Court of the United States. (2025, September 8). *Noem v. Vasquez Perdomo* (No. 25A169) https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/24pdf/25a169_5h25.pdf

[9] Ibid.

[10] 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/

(ICE) operations across the country. In California, Los Angeles has been the site of some of the most racially motivated, aggressive, and legally questionable[11] "roving" ICE raids and detentions to date.

Moreover, Thomas S. Dee, professor at Stanford University's Graduate School of Education, recently documented how ICE raids that took place during January and February 2025 in California's Central Valley–a region heavily reliant on immigrant labor for sustaining the U.S. agricultural supply–coincided with a 22 percent increase in daily student absences.[12] In the same piece, Dee further found that absence rates were even higher among early learners for two key reasons: first, there is a greater concentration of young children living in households with undocumented immigrants, and second, parental fears of legal separation from their children escalated due to a sharp rise in detention and/or deportation. Accordingly, current absenteeism trends among Latino TK/kindergarten students cannot be understood apart from these political and social pressures.

In view of how immigration policy continues to unfold and shift almost daily, this report aims to examine how the current political climate intersects with school attendance for Latino TK and Kindergarten students. Despite current federal immigration enforcement strategies framed as protecting "the American people against invasion,"[13] focus group participants described how the political targeting of Latinos in and around California has led many caregivers[14] to restrict social activities as benign as taking their children to the park, to self-isolate at home, and to question the safety of sending their children to school. The report that follows further highlights not only the ways in which caregivers are navigating these realities, but also increased mental health challenges, mistrust of law enforcement, limited awareness of basic civil rights during detention, and protective strategies they have begun to implement. The report also illuminates caregivers' insights on what schools and communities can do to support attendance and ensure equitable, safe access to education for all children, regardless of their or their caregivers' immigration status.

Methods

Against this backdrop, and given the administration's stated focus on mass detention and deportation efforts currently and primarily directed at Latinos, PIQE conducted six focus groups via Zoom across three regions of California–the Bay Area, the Central Valley, and Los Angeles (Figure 1)–in order to reflect caregiver perspectives and experiences throughout the state. These groups included only Latina/o and/or Indigenous caregivers with cultural/or and familial roots in Mexico, Central America, or South America. Caregivers included in the focus groups were also required to have at least one child enrolled in transitional kindergarten (TK) or kindergarten during the 2024–25 school year.

During the focus group sessions, all participants completed a survey that included questions related to demography and reasons for absences that may apply to their children. Following the completion of the

[11] Supreme Court of the United States. (2025, June 24). *Department of Homeland Security, et al. v. D.V.D., et al.* (No. 24A1153) [Order granting stay]. https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/24pdf/24a1153_l5gm.pdf

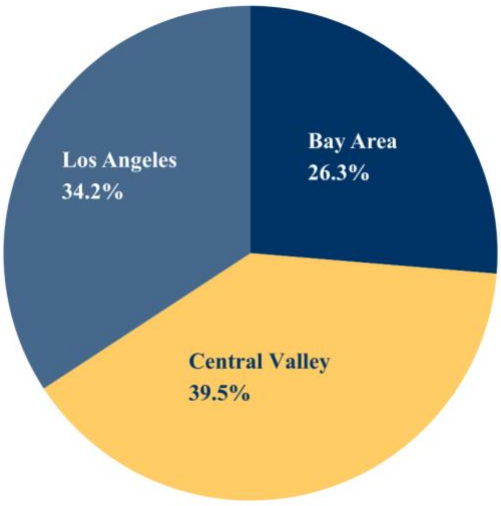
[12] Dee, T. S. (2025, June). *Recent Immigration Raids Increased Student Absences* (EdWorkingPaper No. 25-1202). Annenberg Institute at Brown University. https://doi.org/10.26300/a62e-h526

[13] 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/

[14] 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 terms 'parent' 'parents' 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.

survey, caregivers engaged in a conversation that explored attitudes and household practices related to attendance, the current political climate, and what support Latino families need to help maintain regular attendance for their children, as well as to address other household priorities they may have. The findings presented in this report provide valuable insights, but given the small sample size, they should not be viewed as comprehensive or generalizable to larger populations in California or beyond.

Figure 1 - Caregiver Region



Survey Data - Demographics

A total of 38 caregivers–primarily female (92.1%)–from Los Angeles, the Central Valley, and the Bay Area respectively participated in the focus group survey. Thirty six respondents (94.7%) identified as Hispanic or Latina/o/x with a primary home language of Spanish, and two participants (5.3%) identified as Indigenous from Mexico, Central, or South America with a primary home language of Mixtec. Over 80 percent of participants reported that they have at least one child labeled an English learner (EL).

Figure 2 - Caregiver Gender

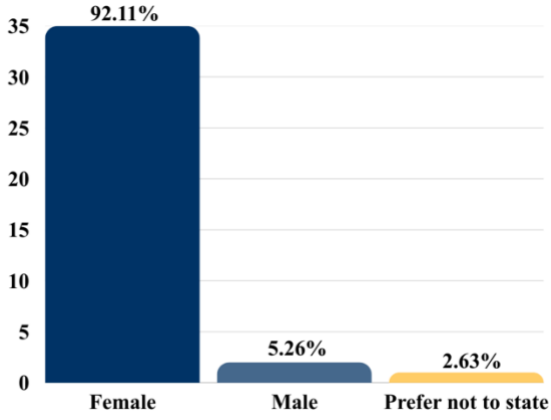
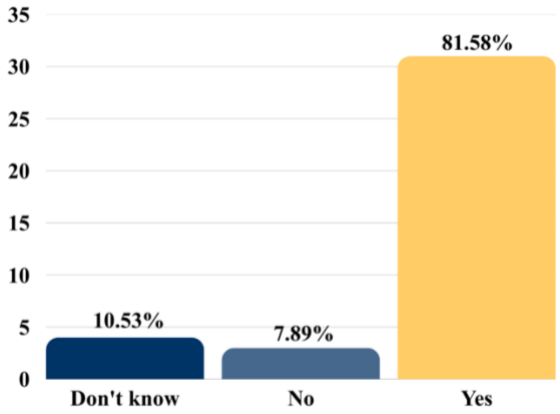


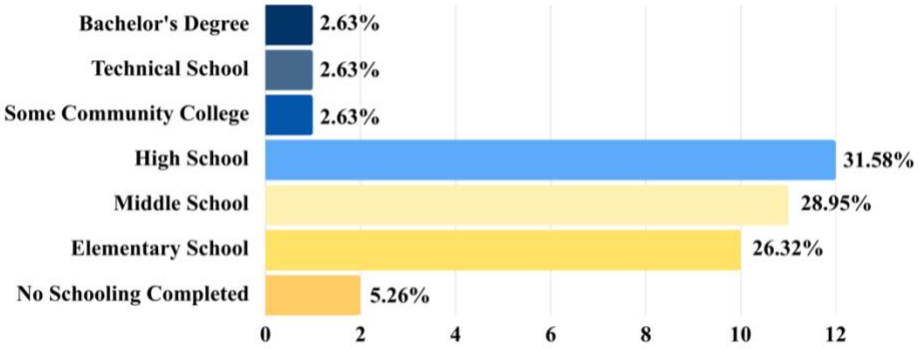
Figure 3 - EL Status of Caregiver Children



Educational attainment varied across the group but remained concentrated at the K–12 level. Just under one-third (31.6%) of participants had completed high school, while over half (55.3%) reported education caps at either the elementary or middle school level. Two respondents reported no formal schooling, and

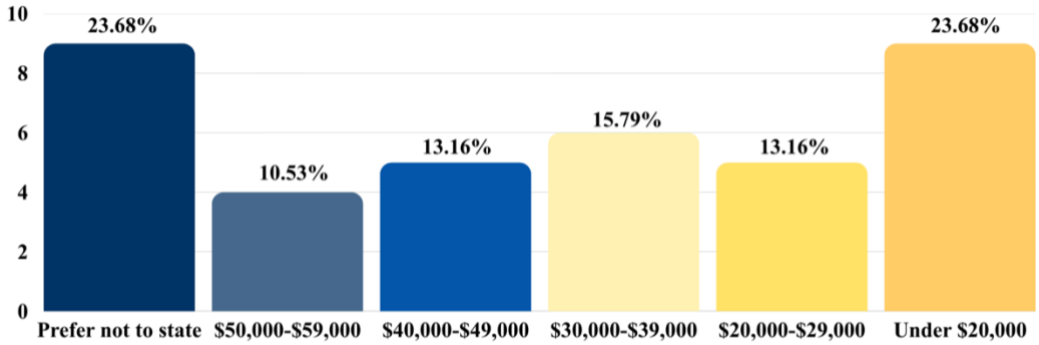
only a handful reported education beyond high school, including technical school, some community college coursework, or a bachelor's degree.

Figure 4 - Caregiver Education Level



Household income levels highlighted the economic challenges facing many participating caregivers. Over half of all respondents reported annual household incomes under $40,000, including almost one-quarter earning below $20,000. Only a small percentage of households (10.3%) reported earnings above $50,000 per year.

Figure 5 - Household Income



Survey Data - Absenteeism

When caregivers were asked how many full school days their child had missed in the past twelve months, most reported relatively few. A majority–nearly 58 percent–said their child was absent only zero to three days, suggesting that many families made strong efforts to keep attendance consistent despite external pressures. At the same time, a sizable minority reflected more frequent absences. About 18 percent of participants reported four to six missed days, 13 percent noted seven to nine, and a small group–just over 2 percent–indicated that their child had missed ten or more days.

Figure 6 - Absence Frequency

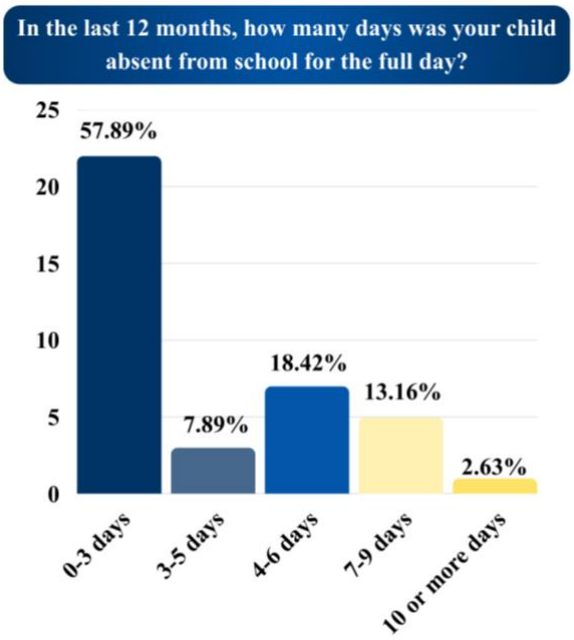
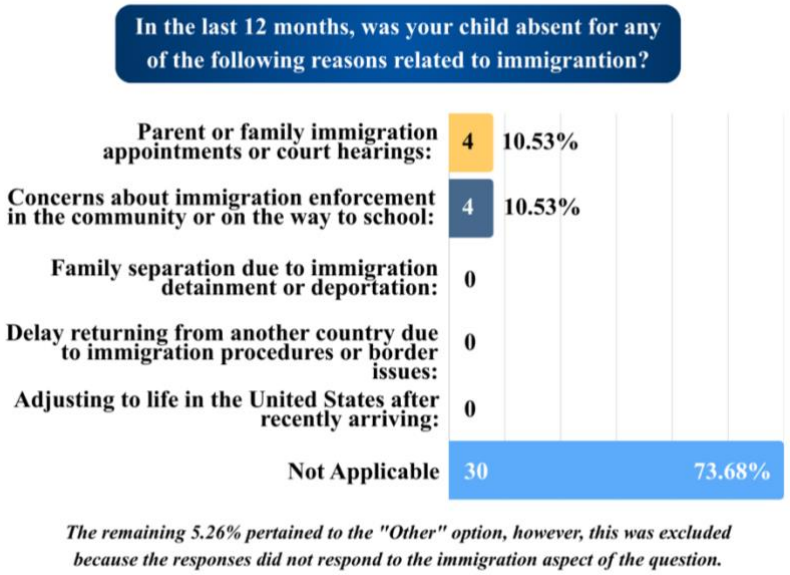


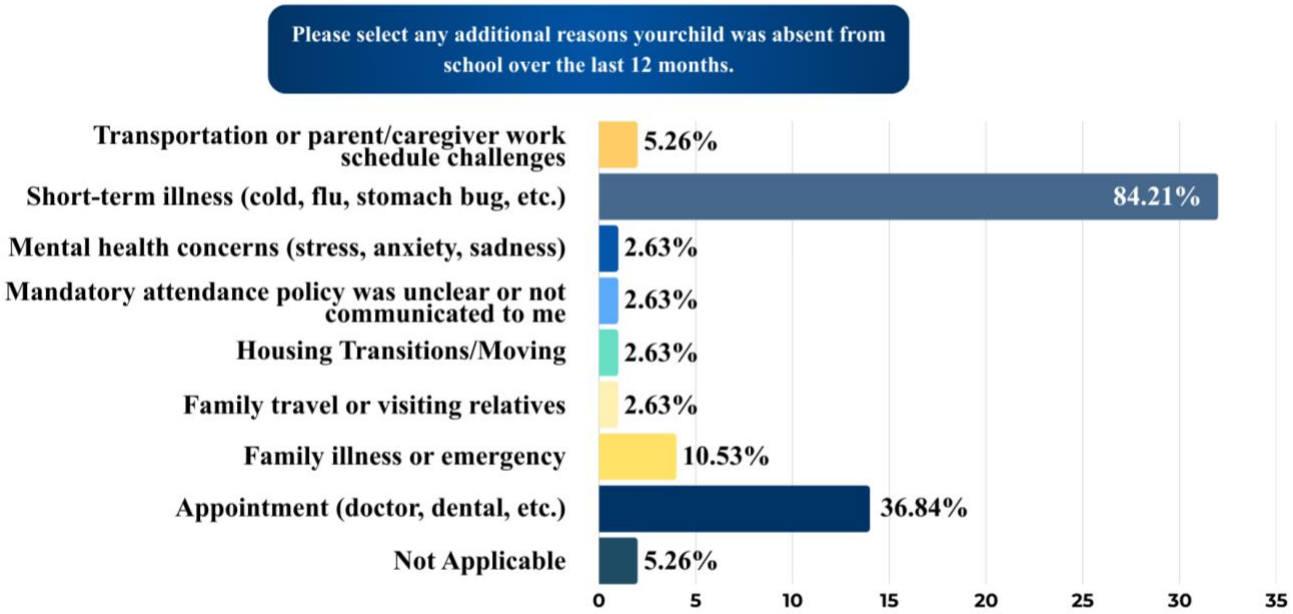
Figure 7 - Absences Related to Immigration



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.

Caregivers were also asked whether immigration-related circumstances had contributed to school absences. While nearly three-quarters of respondents said this did not apply to them, about 11 percent reported keeping their children home due to concerns about immigration enforcement in the community or on the way to school. Another nearly 11 percent noted that parent or family immigration appointments or court hearings directly caused absences. Although not the majority experience, these results underscore that immigration enforcement and related obligations remain disruptive enough to shape school attendance for a notable portion of participants with TK and kindergarten children.

Figure 8 - Absences Unrelated to Immigration



Beyond immigration-specific issues, participants described a range of additional factors influencing attendance. Short-term illness was overwhelmingly the most common, with more than 84 percent of caregivers reporting it as a cause of absence. Over a third also identified medical or dental appointments, and about 11 percent cited family illness or emergency situations. Smaller proportions pointed to family travel, housing transitions, or unclear communication of mandatory attendance policies. About 3 percent of caregivers also identified mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety, or sadness as factors keeping children from school. Finally, roughly 5 percent noted transportation problems or scheduling conflicts between caregiver work and school hours. Together, these data reveal that while common childhood illness remains the leading driver of absence, structural barriers such as health access, family instability, and limited resources compound attendance challenges for Latino families.

Discussion Group Findings

Across all three regions included in the study, most participants–regardless of citizenship or residency status–described experiences and challenges related to immigration enforcement that shaped children's attendance, daily routines, and/or overall well-being. Caregivers consistently reported emotional strain, heightened anxiety, and concern for their children's safety, which influenced decisions about schooling, social activities, and household practices. These patterns illustrate the profound impact of the broader political and social climate on the educational and developmental experiences of young children. The four interconnected themes that were noted from the discussions are described below. The themes highlight both the risks and the resilience present in these households. After each theme summary, some excerpts from the participants have been provided, and pseudonyms have been used in all cases to protect privacy. These are not exhaustive of all that was shared and documented during the focus groups, but those included were chosen to reinforce what was gleaned overall.

Theme 1: Children's Mental Health and Emotional Distress

The climate of fear created by ICE procedures reshaped daily household routines and directly affected young children's mental health. Caregivers described stress and trauma playing out in the home and at school: children expressed reluctance to attend school, displayed visible distress during separations, or struggled with anxiety linked to the possibility of family separation. In some cases, children attempted to comfort parents who were themselves overwhelmed by fear. Participants also reported withdrawing children from extracurriculars or social engagements, which heightened isolation and deepened feelings of sadness. A few shared that they had kept their child home on at least one occasion during the immigration raids in late May and early June 2025, with some participants reporting that their children felt punished by this since they could not fully grasp the situation. These experiences show how deeply the current political pressures are felt even at the earliest stages of learning, and also how caregivers and children alike are forced to choose between daily activities that bring joy and those that will ensure their safety. All groups were held in Spanish so English translations have been provided.

ESPAÑOL	ENGLISH
Por mí, por el miedo de mis hijos de que qué iba a pasar con ellos. Yo no estaba preparada en dejar un papel o en que ellos tuvieran pasaporte. Entonces, yo, ese miedo se me volvió como pánico. Desgraciadamente afecté a mi niña porque no tuvo su cierre de año con sus amiguitos. A ella le afectó porque ella decía que yo era la que - que yo no la quería llevar a la escuela. Ella me decía, "Mamá, yo quiero ir a la escuela, yo quiero ir con mi maestra." Y yo le decía, "mami, no podemos" o "no puedo." Entonces ella todas las vacaciones estuvo diciendo que quería ir a la escuela, que quería la escuela. O sea, no tuvo un cierre en ese aspecto de	*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. It affected her because she would say that I was the one — that I didn't want to take her to school. She would tell me, "Mommy, 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*

despedirse de sus amigos, de que la maestra les dijera, "O nos vamos a ir a un 'break', van a regresar el siguiente año," lo que sea, desafortunadamente.	*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	
No estamos legalmente acá [en Estados Unidos] y tenemos un proceso [legal]. Pues en un cierto momento en la misma escuela a mis niños les metían miedo y decía el niño, no quiero ir porque me van a llevar y me van a separar de ti. Y les digo, "No"— le digo— "no te preocupes, en la escuela no te van a hacer nada y si algo pasa, pues yo me voy con ustedes." Pero sí pasaron mis niños como mucho tiempo así, con el miedo a que se los iban a llevar y que los iban a separar de mí.	*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	
A la niña y al niño les afectó mucho porque se ponían triste por los demás niños, porque muchos niños sí faltaban a la escuela, muchos niños faltaban a la escuela.	*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

Uncertainty and misinformation — often spread through social media — created or reinforced mistrust of law enforcement that some of the participants' children came to understand and absorb as well. Although some participants made distinctions between support of local law enforcement as compared to the aims of ICE agents, it was difficult to make distinctions to their younger children. In several cases, the term "police/*policía*" became the reference they used to explain who or what was the source of their communities being targeted. Reports of unmarked vehicles associated with ICE near schools intensified fears, and many parents avoided contact with school staff if police were present. In response, families often self-isolated, reduced outings, limited children's access to parks or public spaces, and relied on neighbors or relatives for daily errands. For children, this meant restricted opportunities for play and socialization.

ESPAÑOL	**ENGLISH**
Sí, miramos las noticias y pues ella [mi hija] mira cuando tiran a las personas al suelo. Y me dice, "Mira, mami"–dice– "le pegaron, la policía. Y le digo yo "Sí, mami, pero pues todo va a estar bien, yo voy a estar aquí, yo te voy a ir a traer y te voy a dejar a la escuela, no pasa nada, tranquila." Y pues ella me dice que "No, no, yo no quiero salir. Yo no quiero ir a la calle." Y le digo yo,"No tengas miedo, todo va a estar bien, tú no te preocupes." Y pues eso es lo que a ella le da— le mete miedo. Y cuando yo le digo "Vámonos a la escuela" [contesta] "No, yo no quiero ir. Hay mucha policía. Con cuidado, mami, con cuidado" me dice.	*Yes, we watch the news, and my daughter sees when they throw people to the ground. And she says, "Look, Mommy," she says, "the police hit them." And I tell her, "Yes, sweetie," I say, "but everything's going to be okay. I'll be here; I'll take you to school and pick you up; nothing's going to happen, don't worry." But then she tells me, "No, no, I don't want to go out. I don't want to go outside." And I tell her, "Don't be afraid, everything's going to be okay, don't worry." But that's what scares her. And when I tell her, "Let's go to school," she answers, "No, I don't want to go. There are too many police. Be careful, Mommy, be careful," she tells me.*
Lucero, Los Angeles	
Salieron información de que a los inmigrantes los tiran por no sé dónde, o no sé, o sea. Hay una desinformación que a	*Information came out saying that immigrants are being dropped somewhere—I don't even know where, or, I mean,*

veces y uno no sabe qué tanto es real y qué tanto es mentira, y entonces ahí es donde un dice, "Ay, Dios mío, ¿será verdad? ¿Será mentira? ¿Qué va a pasar con mis hijos si me pasa esto? Entonces creo que esa es más la preocupación, nuestros hijos, nuestros hijos.

there's so much misinformation that sometimes you don't know what's real and what's not. And that's when you start thinking, "Oh my God, is it true? Is it false? What will happen to my children if something happens to me?" So I think that's really the biggest worry—our children, our children.

Teresa, Los Angeles

Yo conozco un lugar donde es un edificio federal— no sé qué problemas tenían. El chiste es que estaba lleno de Guardia Nacional y entonces la gente empezó a hacer videos, a publicar que ahí estaba la migra y que se estaba llevando a la gente y todo cuando ellos [los guardias] nada más estaban vigilando el lugar. Entonces sacaron otro video del mismo lugar diciendo que ahí se estaban llevando a la gente, cual eso era mentira. Y no, pues nosotros seguimos nuestra rutina normal. Gracias a Dios, nunca, nunca miramos nada.

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. And well, we just kept up with our normal routine. Thank God, we never, ever saw anything happen.

Noelia, Los Angeles

Yo tengo residencia, ¿verdad? Pero la verdad yo veía todo eso. Mis hijos, o sea, no faltaron por eso, pero trataba de que no salieran a la calle para nada, porque me daba miedo de que les puedan asustar más que nada. Y yo decía, no, pues imagínate— si yo tengo miedo y estoy bien, me imagino a la gente que no tienen sus papeles, pobre gente, y el trauma que cargan los niños con eso. Eso sí, sí se me hizo muy preocupante en este estado, la verdad. De hecho tuve que irme a México [para todo el verano] y nosotros nos fuimos a México para que ellos pudieran salir y estuvieran a gusto.

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, more than anything. 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 they could go out freely and feel at ease.

Belinda, Los Angeles

Ajá y pues ya ve que agarran parejo, pues no, no, eso ahora sí que no discriminan, agarran parejo y pues le entra el miedo. Hubo días también que la gente no trabajaba. En lo personal, pues yo también, pues no, no salía uno a trabajar por el temor. Sí, sí, también los primeros días se quedaban [mis hijos conmigo], como cuando entró el Presidente.

Yeah, and you know how they go after everyone — they don't distinguish [between documented and undocumented Latinos], they just go after everyone, and that's when the fear sets in. There were even days when people didn't go to work. Personally, I also didn't go out to work because of the fear. Yes, yes, during those first days my kids stayed home with me too — like when the President first took office.

Eva, Bay Area

Y yo le decía a mi niña que eran unos policías y que si ellos le preguntaban algo a ella, que ella no contestara o que simplemente le dijera a la maestra que la llevara a la oficina o que le llamara a su mamá. Pues supuestamente iban a ser de la inmigración, pero yo le decía a mi niña que eran policías.

And I told my little girl that they were some police officers, and that if they ever asked her anything, she shouldn't answer — that she should just tell her teacher to take her to the office or to call her mom. Supposedly, they were going to be immigration agents, but I told my little girl they were police officers.

Samanta, Bay Area

Y en la escuela escuchaban o miraban un carro de la policía. Ya los otros niños decían viene inmigración o lo que sea y ya, pues mis niños tenían miedo, estaba bien pequeño, no

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

quería salir ni a su receso y me llamaba la maestra: "Mire, Fernando está llorando que se quiere ir a su casa." Como dos veces y lo vine a recoger y me lo llevé a la casa.	*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

Even as participants reported gaps in knowledge about what to do if detained, many engaged in proactive planning. Some caregivers prepared notarized guardianship letters, updated passports, or taught children how to respond if questioned by authorities. Others reorganized daily routines, coordinated transportation with trusted networks, or invested in home-based activities to keep children safe. While these strategies gave families a measure of control, they disrupted normal routines and often restricted access to school and community life. These protective behaviors reveal resilience but also underscore the emotional toll of constant vigilance.

ESPAÑOL	**ENGLISH**
Nosotros pues decimos 'o pues si me mandan, pues que me manden.' No, no es el problema eso. El problema es de que por mis hijos, yo no sabía de cómo ampararlos o cómo de que alguien tomara las riendas de mis hijos de decir —"OK si te vas, déjame una carta o yo puedo hacer esto"— hasta que yo un día pregunté. O sea, y entonces fue cuando me dijeron que hay una carta que se puede hacer, y la hice. Entonces en ese aspecto yo me preparé para cualquier cosa que pasara. Ahorita yo tengo todo ya - pasaportes, la carta y pues me siento ya un poquito segura porque tengo mi niña grande de 15 años, y entonces a ella yo ya le expliqué más o menos como qué hacer [si me llegan a detener]. Entonces hoy ya me siento un poco tranquila hoy para empezar [de nuevo] mis actividades normales como yo venía haciendo, tener activos a mis hijos, llevarlos a la escuela, el ir y venir– pues lo hace uno con precaución. Ya no es como antes de que oh pues, vámonos. O vamos acá, vamos allá, no. Hoy salimos con precaución.	*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, like, 'Okay, if you have to leave, leave me a letter, or I can take care of this.' Until one day, I asked about it. That's when 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

Le digo a mi hijo que si a nosotros nos llegan a agarrar, su hermano que tiene 24 años–él se va a encargar: "Nosotros nos volvemos a reunir y pues no va a haber gobierno que nos separe de ustedes. Nosotros siempre vamos a estar juntos."	*I tell my son that if they ever take us, his older brother, who's 24, will take charge: "We'll be together again, and there won't be any government that can separate us. We'll always be together."*

Estela, Los Angeles

Many participants shared that they felt supported by resources shared by their children's school. While a handful indicated that little information related to the ICE raids or even the general attendance policy had been shared, most knew daily attendance procedures and had also been made aware of their rights regardless of immigration status and provided with resources for how to connect with legal services. In several cases, schools had provided families with small cards[15] outlining their constitutional rights under

[15] Immigrant Legal Resource Center. (2025). *Red cards / Tarjetas Rojas* [Downloadable cards]. https://www.ilrc.org/red-cards-tarjetas-rojas

the 4th and 5th Amendment both for their personal knowledge and so they could submit them to ICE while also remaining silent, as well as to prevent any unlawful searches of their person, home, and/or possessions. Other forms of school support that participants found helpful to mitigate risks of ICE detention (not necessarily related to citizenship status, but also merely based on racial profiling) and/or to keep them apprised of potential threats on campus were: families being offered the opportunity to complete work through independent study; increased security presence on campus; increased parent portal messaging; schoolwide meetings that provided solid guidance and access to legal and mental health resources, and offering school as a sanctuary.

ESPAÑOL	ENGLISH
Hasta las escuelas nos hacían juntas. También en las escuelas se habló mucho de ese tema. De hecho llegaron policías [locales] a explicarnos que no tuviéramos miedo, que ellos estaban para ayudarnos, no para hacernos daño, y el director también hacía muchas juntas respecto a eso.	*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	
Los maestros en la escuela de mi hijo en high school dieron tarjetas de derechos para dar a los familiares.	*The teachers at my son's high school gave out cards with [constitutional] rights to give to family members.*
Marisol, Central Valley	
En caso de la escuela también de mi hija, sí mandan mensajes como diciéndole a los padres también que no tengan miedo o dándole como su apoyo a los padres. Y hacen también como talleres de inmigración.	*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	
Pues a nosotros nada más la escuela nos notificaban que iban a resguardar a los niños de cualquier cosa en la escuela en caso de que llegaran los de la ICE, y que se iban a mantener seguros los niños—que no nos preocupáramos. Igual ofrecían psicología. O que si alguien tenía algo referente para hablar ahí era de con la consejera o algo así y que se puedan arrimar igual. Nos dieron tarjetitas rojas que para no hacer declaración ni nada o cuando llegaran [ICE] a la casa, pues igual las tarjetitas rojas y para los niños también. Aparte de resguardar a los niños, en algunas instituciones ofrecieron charlas informativas sobre inmigración.	*At our school, they only notified us that they would protect the children from anything at school in case they [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 they [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 the weight of fear, mistrust, and disruption, paticipants consistently pointed to one reason for persevering regardless of citizenship status: the opportunities available to their children through education in the United States. Caregivers emphasized that enduring hardship, risk, and even the possibility of detention was worthwhile if it allowed their children to succeed academically and build better futures. Parents described pride in their children's progress, especially in learning English and achieving early goals. Hope, faith, and the desire to be able to continue contributing to their communities through labor

efforts were common sources of strength. Many participants see this moment as a temporary threat that will not deter them from focusing on long-term benefits for their children. This forbearance and willingness to sacrifice highlight the extraordinary courage of these Latino caregivers and explain why they continue to push for school attendance despite racialized political targeting.

ESPAÑOL	ENGLISH
Yo, en lo personal, es por el futuro de mis hijos. El futuro. Creo que este país da muchos beneficios. Da mucha educación, dan de verdad, o sea uno está agradecido con este país. Esa es la realidad. En el país de nosotros puede ser que sí, pero es un poco más difícil el poder darles una educación a nuestros hijos. Creo que si nosotros nos adaptamos a las cosas, sí se puede, pero nosotros vinimos a este país porque acá hay oportunidades.	*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 I am 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	
Mi motivación es ver a mi hija feliz y ver que a ella le gusta ir a la escuela y animarla siempre, que vaya a la escuela con ganas y todo, que no tenga miedo a nada.	*My motivation is to see my daughter happy and to see that she enjoys going to school, and to always encourage her to go to school with enthusiasm, without fear of anything.*
Ivette, Central Valley	
Ah, pues la alegría que a mí me da— que mi hija, pues, vaya a la escuela. Que aprenda para que algún día se realice y sea alguien en la vida y también la esperanza que hay, que pues que sí, que se termine todo esto [las redadas] para que todas las personas podamos salir y pues estar bien, hacer nuestras labores y sin miedo, sin ningún pendiente y pues estar más a gusto.	*Well, the joy I get is seeing my daughter go to school. That she learns so that one day she can achieve her dreams and become someone in life. And also the hope that all this [the raids] will end so that everyone can go out freely, be safe, do their jobs without fear, without worries, and feel more at ease.*
Enrique, Central Valley	

Regional Differences

While the previous themes were shared across all focus groups, their intensity and expression varied across regions, and were shaped by individual household needs, local conditions, as well as school supports. The following section provides regionally-specific insights.

Central Valley: Caregivers most often linked absences directly to ICE raids and immigration court dates. Economic and transportation barriers (car breakdowns, long distances to bus stops, misaligned work schedules) compounded these pressures. Anxiety and stress were high, and while some schools provided legal rights information and counseling, attendance policies were inconsistently applied. Participants in this group also underscored the need to receive resources in Spanish, more English language development (ELD) support, and would like to feel more welcomed on campus overall by school personnel. Of the three regions, the Central Valley caregivers were the most underinformed when it came to school attendance policies. Participants in this group called for more school meetings in languages other than English to help parents understand attendance policies and the importance of attending TK and kindergarten. Caregivers in this group also stressed that they needed more before- and after-school care for their children due to varying work schedules.

Uno como padre sí, pero en la escuela no, yo siento que como que no le están–bueno en la de que va mi niña–siento que no le están dando tanta importancia [a las redadas]. O no sé, la maestra ni siquiera sabe hablar español, entonces ahorita pues que no se hayan hablado o no nos hayan mandado algún papel o alguna junta, no, nada.

As a parent, yes, I care, but at school, no — at least that's how I feel aboout my daughter's school — I feel like they're not giving it [ICE raids] 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

Tuve que ir a preguntar, tuve que preguntar que a qué hora entraban y la hora que salían porque nomás me recogieron a mi niño y adiós, bye bye y ya. Pero si yo soy nueva [en el país]. Yo le dije, "O, me tienen que decir ir de esto. ¿Me va a llegar algo cuando haya reuniones o algo?" No, nada. Así en blanco me dejaron y yo sí puedo preguntar algo–me toca ir–pero ya que iba [nadie hablaba en] español. No, pues de las que estaban ahí, ni una.

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 country]. 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

La verdad que a mí sí se me ha hecho difícil a veces porque no manejo. Tengo poco de haber llegado y pues sí se me ha hecho difícil, como cuando trabajo y el niño sale.

Honestly, it's been difficult for me sometimes because I don't drive. I haven't been here [in the United States] 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

Ah, pues yo podría decir que podría ayudar que dieran alguna junta a dejándoles saber a los papás sobre la importancia de la asistencia de los niños, porque he escuchado a muchas personas y muchas conversaciones de mamás que a veces dicen,"Ah, pues es que los traigo y son bien poquitas horas las que los cuidan." Y no entienden el concepto que es para aprender, no para que los cuiden. En sí, es para que tus hijos avancen y estaría bien que hicieran como como una junta–una plática nada más–para dejarles saber a los papás la importancia de la asistencia de TK y kinder.

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

Los Angeles: Families reported visible fear around rumors of ICE presence near schools. Preparedness strategies such as notarized guardianship letters, passports, and shifting to safer transportation such as rideshare options were especially prominent. Parents also leaned heavily on faith and family bonds for resilience. Schools played dual roles: some offered strong reassurance through counseling and clear communication, while others left caregivers unsupported due to poor translation or inconsistent messaging. Many participants in this region noted that school buses were *not* available to their children and that they would like to have that option to help with managing things like competing school start times (in families with more than one school-aged child), conflicting work schedules, having to walk to school in inclement weather, and as a workaround in households with only one personal vehicle. Caregivers in this group also noted that more ancillary staff is needed in TK and kindergarten classrooms to support teachers who can seem overwhelmed and short on patience.

Sí tratamos de hablar del tema, pero siempre con calma, creo que esa fue la mejor manera que nosotros lo trabajamos. Como le vuelvo a repetir, encomendándonos a Dios y pues si nos toca, pues nos toca. ¿Y qué podemos hacer, verdad? Porque a veces tal vez no nos va a tocar y nosotros nos enfermamos por la misma situación que ya está crítica y enfermamos a nuestros hijos. También creo que esa fue la forma de nosotros de sobrellevar este tema.

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

Yo miraba a mis hijos y yo decía, yo no los puedo tener aquí, yo no los puedo tener encerrados en cuatro paredes. Gracias a Dios tengo familia que venía, me visitaba con sus hijos, podían salir a jugar y caminar un poco este, o sea, había un poco de apoyo con mis hijos y que vieron a otros niños. Pero a mí sí me costó la verdad. Me costó mucho.

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

Ahorita ya tengo un vehículo donde voy a dejar unos a la escuela y luego paso a dejar a otros, pero el año pasado sí hubo un tiempo en que no tenía carro, entonces sí se me hacía un poco difícil. Como les digo, tengo cuatro hijos.

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

Bay Area: Caregivers described fewer direct encounters with ICE, but persistent fear circulated through social media and community narratives. Non-immigration safety concerns such as kidnappings, shootings, or distracted drivers also influenced attendance decisions. Several caregivers in this group depended on older siblings or neighbors for drop-off and pick-up. Some schools in the region were proactive in distributing constitutional rights information and offering reassurance, which parents valued, even for those with children enrolled in largely non-immigrant school populations. In terms of needs, participants described variable school oversight. In one case, a child went missing when he was permitted to get on a school bus despite not being signed up for the service. Parents also called on school leaders to be more sensitive to work schedules in terms of ensuring students were dismissed in a timely manner so parents picking up over a lunch hour could get back to work on time, and participants also expressed a desire for more homework help to be available on campus. Specific to TK and kindergarten students, several participants noted that more professional development was needed for early learner educators specifically around topics such as developmentally appropriate strategies for redirection, patience, and nurturing young learners so they would not fear their teachers and school by extension.

Porque en el trabajo a veces no me dan oportunidad y yo lo que hago últimamente es no tomar mi hora de lonche que es de 12 a 12:30 para poder salir [a recoger a mi hijo] a las 2:15. Hay ocasiones que la maestra se tarda un poquito. En mi caso se me complica porque yo hago mi ponchada para poder salir por el niño y a veces regreso un poco tarde. El hecho de regresar un poco tarde a mí no me afecta en decir, bueno, me van a descontar 5 minutos o 10 minutos. Pero en el caso de mis jefes o las personas que están arriba de mí, sí hay un poco de molestia, independientemente de que esos minutos no me los pagan.

At work, sometimes I'm not given flexibility, and lately what I do is skip my lunch break, which is from 12 to 12:30, 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

A mí me gustaría que también las del personal de la escuela fueran más empáticas con los niños, porque por ejemplo, las maestras de kínder trabajan con niños chiquitos y yo siento que a veces no les tienen paciencia. Me ha tocado ver y escuchar que les gritan y pues los niños se espantan y eso les quita la motivación y las ganas de ir a la escuela. A veces amanecen que no quieren ir por ese motivo.

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 currently shape attendance for Latino TK and kindergarten students, as revealed through the lived experiences and insights of their caregivers. For many caregivers in these groups, daily routines are overshadowed by fear that political agendas have introduced or amplified in their daily lives. These pressures often intersect with already existing economic and logistical barriers such as transportation, misaligned work schedules, and the absence of affordable childcare before and after school. The result is that some children are experiencing emotional distress from an early age, while others are absent simply because their parents must prioritize safety, stability, or employment over attendance expectations.

At the same time, caregivers display extraordinary agency and strength. Caregivers are engaging their children in honest conversations about the realities around them, preparing for emergencies, and relying on community networks of faith, family, and neighbors to maintain a sense of normalcy. Their resilience is evident in the protective strategies they employ, i.e. ensuring guardianship paperwork is in order, finding creative ways to transport children safely, and advocating for better communication and translation from schools. Many caregivers want to be more informed about attendance policies and more connected to school communities, calling for clearer messaging, multilingual meetings, and a more welcoming, patient, and supportive environment in early learning classrooms.

These findings underscore that attendance challenges cannot be separated from the broader social and emotional landscape in which these families live. Schools must therefore approach absenteeism not only as a logistical or compliance issue, but also as a reflection of deeper systemic barriers and community level experiences, including their fears. Educational leaders, policymakers, and staff have an urgent responsibility to stay attuned to the realities that 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.

Acknowledgements

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.

HEISING-SIMONS FOUNDATION