

Summary

Undocumented youth face significant barriers to academic and social mobility along with significant isolation within the school context. Yet, educators are potentially critical advocates for undocumented youth and their families. Drawing on three longitudinal mixed-methods research projects and interviews with over 100 students and educators, the author describes the factors that inhibit school-based personnel's advocacy for undocumented youth in K-12 settings. This research suggests that state and local policy should be aimed at increasing SBP's policy knowledge and providing SBPs with the resources and professional discretion needed to effectively advocate for undocumented youth and their families.

Author Biography

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Educator and School-based Personnel's Advocacy for Undocumented Youth in K-12 Settings

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"We're free but not free at the same time. ICE knocks at the door. They're near school. Where do we belong?" (Interview with undocumented youth, 2017)

Undocumented students and their families often face barriers to successfully navigating the school system due to a lack of resources, institutional support, and unclear policies at the state and local levels. And increasingly, their fears of discrimination are intensified by a hostile political climate, wavering public opinion about immigration, and variation in state and local immigration policies (e.g., Pedroza 2019). By law, however, schools are required to be safe spaces and offer educational access to students regardless of their immigration status (*Plyler v. Doe* 1982). Unfortunately, school-based personnel (SBPs)—such as teachers, social workers, and counselors—often struggle to advocate for undocumented students due to their own lack of policy awareness or significant constraints on their role and resources. Yet, despite an unsteady, hostile, and contradictory U.S. policy context, SBPs remain critical advocates for undocumented youth and their families.

How do school-based personnel advocate for undocumented students and what obstacles do they face in doing so? Based on three longitudinal mixed-methods research projects and interviews with nearly 75 undocumented youth and 25 SBPs in multiple cities, I found that SBPs play a critical role in helping undocumented youth navigate anti-immigrant policies, ICE surveillance, and threats of deportation. SBPs provide programs and services (or refer youth to outside services if schools cannot meet their needs), safe learning and socio-emotional environments, and ensure equitable access to educational opportunity and public resources, all while facing limited school resources and potentially anti-immigrant state or local ideologies and policies.

Based on this research, there are four key interrelated factors that impact SBP's ability advocate for undocumented students:

1. SBP's level of knowledge about policies that impact undocumented youth varies widely across schools. This is made more difficult by state and local variation in (or frequent changes to) immigrant policy, as well as threats to rescind federal programs that help undocumented youth and families.
2. SBPs may have little role flexibility, limiting their decision-making power within the school system. For example, if a teachers' role is *only* to implement curriculum and a social workers' role is *only* to manage caseloads, then there are strict boundaries on how often and to what extent SPBs can advocate for undocumented youth.
3. Similarly, SBPs may be limited or constrained in their ability to leverage relationships with other individuals in the school system (other teachers, administrators, etc.) to promote equity for undocumented youth.
4. SBPs personal backgrounds can shape how and in what ways they support undocumented students and their families. Research shows that SBPs who completed graduate work related to language learning and multiculturalism, were specifically working with English as a second language populations, or who had personal experiences with immigrants were more likely to advocate for undocumented youth. Likewise, personal

Source

Rodriguez, Sophia, Timothy Monreal, and Joy Howard. 2018. "It's About Hearing and Understanding Their Stories": Teacher Empathy and Socio-political Awareness Toward Newcomer Undocumented Students in the New Latino South. *Journal of Latinos and Education*. DOI: 10.1080/15348431.2018.1489812

Further Reading

Crawford, Emily, and Fernando Valle. 2016. "Educational Justice for Undocumented Students: How School Counselors Encourage Student Persistence in Schools." *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 24(81):1–24.

Rodriguez, Sophia, and William McCorkle. 2019. "Examining Teachers' Awareness of Immigration Policy and its Impact on Attitudes Toward Undocumented Students in a Southern State." *Harvard Journal of Hispanic Policy* 31(1):21–44.

Rodriguez, Sophia, and Timothy Monreal. 2017. "'This State is Racist': Policy Problematization and Undocumented Youth Experiences in the New Latino South." *Educational Policy* 31(6):764–800.

Roth, Benjamin J. 2017. When College is Illegal: Undocumented Latino Youth and Educational Attainment in South Carolina. *Journal of the Society for Social Work Research* 8(4):539–561.

U.S. Department of Education. 2015. "Resource Guide: Supporting Undocumented Youth." Washington. October 20. (<https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/supporting-undocumented-youth.pdf>)

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ideologies—such as level of nationalism or political affiliation—also shape the extent to which SBPs advocate for undocumented youth.

This research also underscores the variation in SBPs' responses to school and policy constraints and deepens our awareness of how SBPs work within those constraints to engage in "ad hoc" advocacy for undocumented youth (Rodriguez, Monreal, and Howard 2018). For example, some SBPs choose to stay within the boundaries defined by school and policy contexts either due to fear of reprimand or a lack of policy knowledge (such as that schools are considered "sensitive locations" that ICE ought not to enter into; Rodriguez and McCorkle 2019). Alternatively, some SBPs challenge or disrupt the school structures that limit opportunity or criminalize undocumented youth, often to their own detriment or isolation within the school context. For example, SBPs may choose to disregard school policy in order to "help kids get services if they need them and help them navigate the law without breaking it or getting caught," as one educator said in a 2019 interview.

Policy Implications & Recommendations

Given the steady influx of undocumented immigrants into the U.S. and that K-12 settings are a major site of socialization and potential inclusion or exclusion, this research suggests the need to focus policy efforts on SBPs and better equip them to advocate for students. While I recognize the significant demands that SBPs endure as educators, they also play a critically and potentially empowering role in the lives of undocumented youth. SBPs are especially well positioned to help youth and their families navigate threats of deportation, race-based criminalization of immigrants, and overall surveillance of immigrant communities across the United States.

These findings reveal the importance of knowledgeable SBPs. As previously noted, in many cases SBPs were unaware of policies impacting undocumented students and therefore engaged in limited or no advocacy for them. The implication of the research calls for increasing policy knowledge and encouraging school districts and schools to engage in professional development related to immigration policy. Overall, the research indicates that school districts and schools struggle to implement coherent policies that promote safety and well-being for undocumented children.

Given these findings and knowing the challenges ahead with regard to U.S. immigration reform, I advocate for three policy recommendations that are aligned with educational and sociological research:

1. Expand policy awareness at school, district, and state levels, especially given the variation in policy enactment across contexts.
2. Center SBP voices and experiences as critical components of policy-relevant training and professional development.
3. Adhere to the law and prioritize *Plyler v. Doe* as a key protection of educational rights for all children regardless of immigration status; and by extension, maintain schools as more than just "sensitive locations," but as sanctuaries for undocumented youth and children.

While increasing policy knowledge does not guarantee greater well-being or positive academic outcomes for undocumented students, the research suggests that it can increase the potential for SBP advocacy and empowerment in service of undocumented students and their families. Rather than operating from the margins in schools (with the added burden of potential reprimand for overstepping their roles or worrying about their job security), SBPs should be encouraged to serve all children regardless of their immigration status.