



On the Safe Side

BRIEF-CASE

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As soon as the Bradley Public Schools (BPS) leadership team gathers for their weekly meeting, Superintendent Kevin Nyland dives in. "Another neighboring district just released a public statement affirming their support for immigrant families and explaining what protections they are putting in place for students and parents. We've got to decide whether it's time we do the same."

The rest of the team nods in recognition. A small city about forty miles from the state capital, Bradley has seen an influx in recent decades of newcomer families fleeing violence and civil war in Central and South America. BPS educators pride themselves on serving the immigrant population well: they have a robust dual-language program, where students learn in both English and Spanish, as well as strong relationships with community partners that help newcomers get settled in the city. But recently, families have been contacting teachers and central office administrators to ask whether U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) will use public schools, or the data that public schools collect, to locate and detain immigrant students and families.

"Absolutely we release a statement," Cecily Brown, Assistant Superintendent of Operations, declares. "We don't know the exact numbers, of course, but probably half our students have non-citizen family members, whether they're citizens themselves. Our families are scared and need our reassurance."

"Yeah, and rumors have been spreading like wildfire ever since ICE arrested those people outside the supermarket," Roland Strong, Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning, affirms. "The day after ICE vans parked outside the Walgreens near the high school, a third of kids across the districts were absent! Parents are afraid their kids will be picked up at school or on their way home—or that parents themselves will be picked up while kids are at school and the family will be separated. We've *got* to convince parents that it's safe to send their kids to class. We're still fighting learning loss after Covid. We can't sustain this level of absenteeism."

"Look, I know that our reading and math scores are down across the board," Marisol Juarez, Chief Equity Officer, sighs, "but I'm not convinced that putting out a public statement is the best move. Let's face it: our immigrant families *are* at greater risk than they were under the last administration. ICE no longer treats schools—or anywhere else—as safe zones. Putting something in writing just spotlights our immigrant community and endangers them further."

"We can't make promises about kids' safety on route to and from school," Cecily acknowledges, "but we *can* reassure parents that ICE agents won't be allowed into buildings without a warrant."

"But what if Marisol is right that putting out a statement could *attract* ICE agents to our buildings?" Trini Albiar, Director of Communications, asks. "These days, any critical comments about the administration can bring unwanted attention from social media and the press. We could see an uptick in ICE enforcement or in threats against immigrant families from other groups or individuals. Let's ask teachers and principals to reach out to families informally to reassure them we're doing everything we can to keep kids safe. In-person conversations and phone calls seem like the best bet; nothing in writing."

"Personal reassurances won't convince parents to send their kids to school if ICE is in town," Roland objects. "Besides, teachers are already overwhelmed fielding kids' and parents' questions and fears."

Unless we make a clear statement as a district, kids are going to keep missing school and our scores and graduation rates will keep going down.”

“And you think they will come to school with news cameras all around town and vigilantes calling in threats at all hours?” Trini retorts.

“Here’s another question,” Dr. Nyland sighs. “Given that other districts in the state *are* putting out public statements reaffirming their support for newcomer and immigrant families, might community members interpret our lack of a similar statement as a lack of support?”

Without clear consensus from the team, Dr. Nyland ends the meeting still feeling uncertain: how should BPS let newcomer families know the district supports them—and what goals can they realistically achieve in doing so?

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