



# Educational Barriers at the Border and Beyond

How Long Island Elementary School Teachers Can Support and Uplift Immigrant Students

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## Overview

Today, [one in four](#) US public school students come from households with at least one immigrant parent. By 2050, it is projected that more than [one third](#) of all schoolchildren. It is imperative for schools to encourage, support and uplift students of all backgrounds. This document is an informational and practical resource designed to help elementary school teachers on Long Island:

1. Understand immigration at the national and local level
2. Better support the educational and emotional needs of immigrant children.

## The Realities of Immigration at the US-Mexico Border

Immigrant families are one of the fastest [growing](#) demographic groups in the US. In recent years, there has been an unprecedented increase in immigrants arriving at the US-Mexico border who are refugees and asylum seekers. A majority of immigrants [arriving](#) at the southern border are family units (56%). Nine percent are unaccompanied minors.

Immigrants come to the United States for a variety of reasons, but a growing share of individuals, particularly from the Northern Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador), are fleeing violence and persecution, often from gang-related

activities. A recent Doctors Without Border report found that [nearly 40%](#) of Northern Triangle migrants cited violence against them or their families as a main reason for immigration. Extreme poverty and environmental degradation are also driving factors.

In addition to the potential hardships that immigrants face in their home country, the [migratory journey](#) to the US-Mexico border is extremely dangerous and strenuous. Migrants face long journeys, often by foot or riding cargo trains, with few belongings, food or protection. Nearly [80 percent](#) of women and girls who travel to the southern border of the US are sexually assaulted. Since 2014, over 2,000 [deaths](#) have been recorded along migratory routes, though the true number is much higher.

## Current Policies

New policies enacted under the Trump administration have made seeking asylum far more difficult. One such policy, the [Migrant Protection Program \(MPP\)](#), or the "remain in Mexico" policy, mandates that immigrants, including asylum-seekers, cannot stay in the US while waiting for their court proceedings to determine immigration status. These restrictions have led to [informal tent camps](#) on the Mexican side of the border to arise, as migrants await US entry. Mexico has barred UN intervention and a humanitarian crisis has evolved. Individuals are forced to live in tents in deplorable sanitation conditions, inadequate access to medical services and proper sanitation, food and water scarcity,

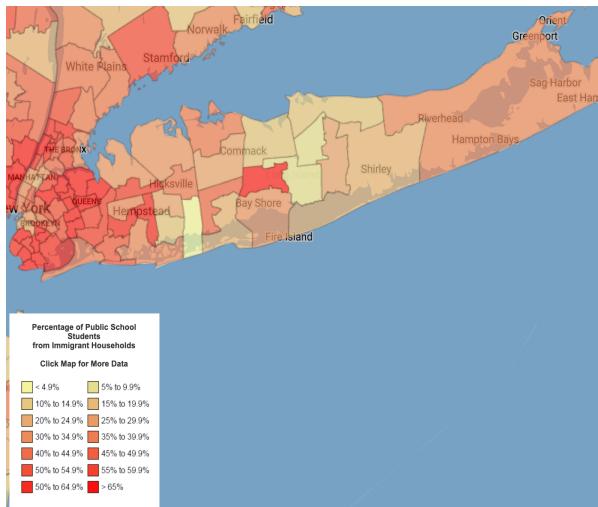
threat of violence, and lack of educational resources.

## Immigration on Long Island

Deepening understanding and empathy of the hardships that immigrant children face is critical to becoming a teacher who understands and supports all students and family circumstances.

There are currently 526,000 immigrants on Long Island, accounting for [one-fifth](#) of the population.

The [map](#) below highlights the high percentage of immigrant children in Long Island public schools across townships.



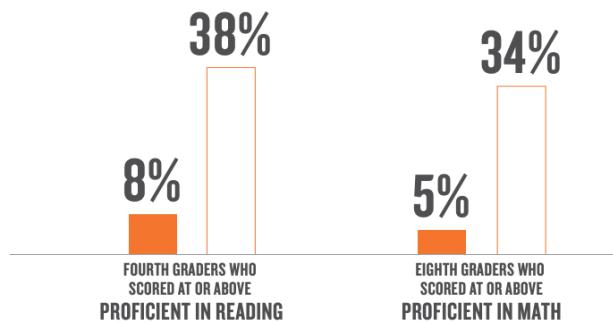
It is important to note that the share of immigrant families varies widely across schools, from 3 to 77 percent. Long Island has high levels of school segregation and this trend is on the [rise](#). It is important to recognize the need for systemic change in education policy, while also taking steps at the classroom-level to better support immigrant children in our communities.

## Barriers to Education for Immigrant Children

Educational gaps for immigrant students in the United States persist, as seen in the figure below.

### READING AND MATH PROFICIENCY LEVELS (2015)

■ CHILDREN IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES □ CHILDREN IN U.S.-BORN FAMILIES



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress.

NOTE: English-language learner status is used as a proxy for children in immigrant families.

Long Island has higher achievement levels than the national average, but nonetheless, these gaps persist here on Long Island. In 2018, [Nassau County](#) reported that 90 to 95 percent of White, Asian and Black residents had a high school diploma, as compared to only 72 percent of Latinx residents. Nearly half of white residents have a bachelor's degree, as compared to only 21 percent of Latinx residents.

## Why do these educational gaps exist?

Immigrant children often face a unique set of challenges in the classroom. These gaps exist because of and are reinforced by many factors, such as:

- Socioeconomic challenges

- Community conflict
- Language barriers among students and parents
- Trauma and mental health needs
- Interrupted education
- Inability to access special education and social services
- Cultural shock and feelings of isolation

*Trauma and Mental Health.* Young children of immigrants, particularly in refugee families, are more likely than their classmates to be affected by [trauma](#), due to experiences before, during or after migration. This often leads to behavioral and emotional challenges. Furthermore, immigrant families are less likely to have access to key services to help students deal with these challenges. The gang violence that asylum-seekers flee can be present in Long Island communities, causing further trauma and feelings of insecurity.

*Community Conflict.* Communities may not be accepting of immigrants. These sentiments cause fear, alienation or insecurity among immigrant children and families.

*Interrupted Education.* Violence, gang persecution, economic hardship and other factors in immigrant children's home countries can cause extended periods of education absenteeism. Time spent migrating, in tent camps, and dealing with bureaucratic [enrollment issues](#) once on Long Island can also cause major gaps in a child's education. Research shows that an overwhelming majority of immigrant

parents worry deeply about their children [falling behind](#) in school.

## The Role of Teachers

Classrooms can be a place of reprise, security and advancement for children. You are now equipped with a better understanding of the unique barriers that immigrant children face. Now, we highlight critical ways in which teachers can take an active role in positively impacting the lives of immigrant children.

"These are America's children, and there is no question that they will play a role in our future. The question is: What kind of future will we create for them and for the nation?"  
 - [Race for Results Policy Report](#)

It is important to remember that immigration is the lived experience of families. Teachers must work to dismantle their inherent biases and serve the most vulnerable students in their classrooms. Immigrant children are invaluable members of our classrooms. Teachers are the key to creating environments that allow all children to be their best selves and students.

## Directly Supporting Students

Reaching out directly to students is important. Teachers need not solve students' problems, but simply providing a trusted outlet to talk to can be helpful. Identifying the different types of [stress](#),

trauma and anxiety in students will help avoid triggers that may upset students. Listen to students to provide social-emotional support. Reaching out to families and addressing their concerns fosters well-rounded student success. Finally, know when and how to connect students and families with resources in your community that serve their physical, emotional and psychological needs. Again, teachers may not solve all of students' problems, but they can help identify challenges and act as a channel for resource connection.

## Ways to Create an Inclusive Classroom

There are well-documented benefits of exposure to a diverse set of peers. However, community stigmas and feelings of cultural shock among immigrant students may drive wedges in classroom inclusion. Therefore, teachers are uniquely positioned to help foster an inclusive experience. Below is a list of ways to foster inclusion in the classroom.

 **Learn to Say All Names Correctly:** A simple task, this helps students feel comfortable and accepted.

 **Create a Safe Space or Sanctuary:** New students may feel overwhelmed or frustrated, so providing a space for them calm down, process, relax and be alone helps them adjust to a potentially overwhelming new environment .

 **Build Global Competence:** The global competence framework has four key elements- investigating the world, recognizing perspectives, communicating ideas, and taking action. It is particularly

important to teach young students to communicate their ideas and recognize different perspectives among their peers. Ultimately, this will foster a respectful classroom setting for all.

 **Create a Classroom Designed for Non-English Speakers:** Labeling items all around the room, creating incentives, assigning help buddies and using visuals are among the many great ways to engage students of all language levels. Body language is also important; exaggerating, using "eye talk" and voice modulation can help English-learners in all subjects.

 **Foster Relationships with Parents:** Immigrant parents or guardians may face unique obstacles (e.g. language differences, residency statuses) that make it more difficult to connect. Put in extra effort to foster a relationship. Together you can help children succeed in all aspects of life.

 **Encourage Participation:** Learning English is a difficult task and requires time and patience. Try to ensure that language differences impede other learning areas as little as possible. Successful models encourage students to participate in their dominant language when needed in order to participate and complete academic work.

 **Value Stories and Perspectives:** It is important to tell stories and relate lessons that speak to the experiences of all children. The Global Education Toolkit has 326 multicultural book titles for grades pre-K through 6.

 **Avoid Penalizing Absenteeism:** Understand that situations are often out of

the control of the child. Long Island has had documented issues in barriers to enrollment. Gaps in a child's education are likely reflective of bureaucratic issues and not a student's ability or willingness to learn.

## Lesson Plans and Activities to Best Engage Immigrant Children

Below are examples of lesson plans and activities that better support all children.

**Non-Verbal Activities:** Young children with language differences deserve a fully engaging classroom. One way to do this is to create activities that require little English dependency. This helps to engage all children, breaking down barriers to non-English speaking children.

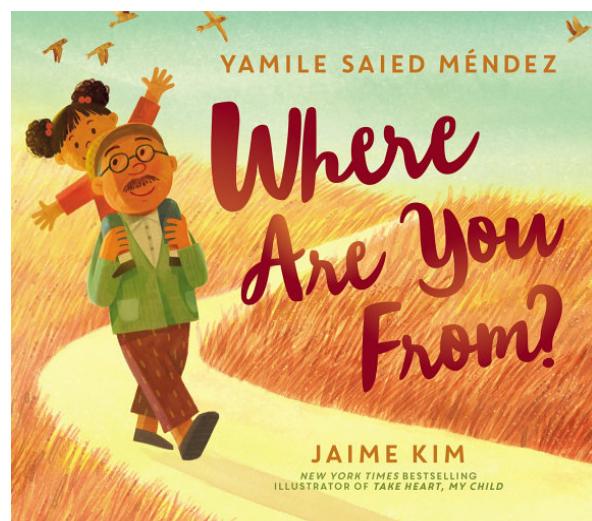
- One lesson plan with noted success is incorporating music into lessons. Creating a "band" in the classroom is one such lesson. Music has been shown to help refugee students. Students can make their own instruments from craft supplies. For example, beads in water bottles can create maracas, strings can create guitars. Creating the instruments is engaging and requires little English dependency. Then having the students perform together promotes classroom cooperation and inclusion.
- Another activity to engage all students is to play charades with picture cards. Allowing students to interact with one another by breaking down language dependency is critical. Many traditional games in the classroom can replace words with pictures. This allows children

of different language backgrounds to easily interact while helping students learn English.

### Teaching Immigration to Students:

It is important to teach children about the experiences and perspectives of others, particularly those that differ from their own. Doing so creates an inclusive and more engaged classroom. One way to teach immigration to young children is through storytelling. Elementary-level titles include:

- *Where Are You From?* By Yamile Saied Méndez
- *I'm New Here* by Anne Sibley O'Brien
- *When Stars are Scattered* by Victoria Jamieson and Omar Mohamed
- *Coming to America: The Story of Immigration* by Betsy Maestro
- *The Wall in the Middle of the Book* by Jon Agee
- *Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation* by Edidge Danticat



[Click here](#) for a longer book list.

### Celebrating All Cultures:

Representation matters, and it is important that all traditions and cultures are celebrated equally. Encouraging children to share traditions, foods, and music that they like will enable them to feel accepted and also help peers to learn more about them.

One engaging lesson is "Family Food Day", where students can bring in their favorite family recipes. Having a day for students to either make select dishes in the classroom or bring in their favorite food from home will allow everyone to recognize and celebrate the experiences of others. Tasting and sharing food is interactive and can give students with limited English skills a way to bond with peers. Teachers may even incorporate the measurement quantities of recipes into math lessons. Do be mindful of financial and other constraints of students, and if making food is not feasible, alternative ways to share experiences, such

as through music, can be equally as effective.

## **Conclusion**

The number of migrants entering the United States is growing, particularly on Long Island. Immigrant students face unique challenges during migratory journeys, at the border, and in schools in the United States. Understanding the current policies and trends of immigration, as well as the mechanisms causing and reinforcing educational gaps is a critical first step. Second, teachers must learn to adopt policies, lessons and mindsets in their classrooms that help to reduce inequities, create inclusive environments, and allow immigrant students to feel supported. This document aims to serve as tool that helps teachers accomplishing these goals.