

ANSWER SHEET

Challenges that young immigrants face with U.S. public schools



Perspective by [Valerie Strauss](#)

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The recent move by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) to use state funds to pick up migrant Venezuelans in Texas and fly them to the politically liberal island of Martha's Vineyard got enormous media attention — which he intended.

What too often gets ignored in the national debate about immigration policy is the plight of migrant children who come to the United States and want to go to school. Legally they are allowed to attend public schools, though they face numerous hurdles before they can sit in a classroom and after they enroll.

This post looks at these challenges. It was written by Sophia Rodriguez, an assistant professor in urban education at the University of Maryland at College Park and author of the recent book "[Race Frames in Education.](#)" Her research examines how school and policy contexts welcome and include Latino/x immigrant youths and how community-school partnerships increase access to resources and opportunities for immigrant-origin youths. At U-Md., she directs the [Immigrant Ed Next Lab](#), which includes several research projects to promote policy-relevant research and advocacy for immigrant youths.

Note: This post includes a number of quotes from people Rodriguez interviewed during her research on the basis of maintaining their anonymity. I have left them in because they are necessary to tell the story.

By Sophia Rodriguez

Many migrants, especially unaccompanied youth, face uncertain paths in detention and after their release in local communities. Schools are often the first and sometimes the only places they can turn for resources. Research shows that everyday educators have been left to deal with the aftermath of recent political charades, as well as a broken immigration system, racialized immigration surveillance, deplorable detention facility conditions, and lack of access to educational and social resources for these young people.

Newly arriving migrants are an ongoing reality that schools must confront, and they do not have the luxury of playing politics. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) recently used taxpayer funds to fly approximately 50 Venezuelan migrants, including youth, from Texas to Martha's Vineyard, a stunt that does nothing to address the actual shortcoming of immigration policy. While just one example, schools and local communities and schools tend to be necessarily pragmatic actors when faced with the influx of newcomer unaccompanied migrants. Yet, challenges remain in this effort to provide a space to belong.

Newcomer unaccompanied youth

As of August, more than 10,000 unaccompanied children were under the care of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and entitled to shelter and education while in detention. The United States defines an unaccompanied minor as an immigrant who is under the age of 18 and not in the care of a parent or legal guardian at the time of entry, who is left unaccompanied after entry, and who does not have a family member or legal guardian willing or able to care for them in the arrival country. These children are part of a large global migrant group that are settling in the U.S. due to high rates of violent crime, gang violence and recruitment, and severe economic insecurity in their home countries.

Upon arrival in the United States, unaccompanied minors face strict and often inhumane policies, mistreatment, mistreatment, deplorable conditions, and legal procedures designed to keep many of them in custody. Many find their physical and mental well-being at risk. In addition, these youth face educational barriers, yet the schools and districts that serve these students lack federal financial assistance and rely on ad hoc local support systems.

Educational rights and challenges

Since 2017, I have interviewed and observed over 100 immigrant youth who are unaccompanied and undocumented, as well as hundreds of educators, administrators, counselors, social workers and mediators between schools and the Office of Refugee Resettlement. I have learned that newcomers arrive daily, depending on migration flows, and immediately rely upon schools to support them. One coordinator for newcomers in the Mid-Atlantic said, "It's everything, from getting them enrolled, to getting them clothes." Recently, when faced with Venezuelan newcomers, an educator in the Northeast said, "We're scrambling. We're making calls and partnering with local organizations." Another explained how "the [education and immigration] systems make it hard for these youth to access resources and in some cases enroll in school — a basic educational right they have. Lastly, a service-provider and former counselor, noted: "There are resources in this country, but they're not well-coordinated."

Long-term research from multiple sources confirms these observations and reveals three major educational challenges: complicated school enrollment processes, lack of resources or misallocation, and fears of immigration enforcement and in local communities.

School enrollment

To enroll in public U.S. schools, families must first provide multiple documents and navigate complicated systems. For unaccompanied newcomers, providing proof of residence, a birth certificate, and vaccination records can be a considerable obstacle. Some districts in the United States have decided not to require documentation, with one district official explaining: “We have a big issue with immigration taking away all of their documents, and not providing them with the proper paperwork, especially in detention. Most of the time, the unaccompanied youth have nothing. ZERO.”

Another respondent echoed the difficulty of registering students who were detained on arrival in the United States: “When kids are released from detention to a sponsor [family member or distant relative]. They don’t even have anything showing that they’re the parent or relative. We have to dig through the immigration-related paperwork packets that they do have.”

Online registration systems preclude immigrant families due to language barriers as well. Between the complicated nature of the immigration system and the seemingly arbitrary requirements for enrolling in school, “connecting the dots” is all one can do.

Resource (mis)allocation and (un)coordination

Although unaccompanied children have a right to attend school, it is more difficult to make claims on appropriate services. State and local policymakers contribute to these difficulties when there are unclear resources or shortages of staff to support newcomers, and multiple governmental, and local agencies involved. One educator noted, “There’s resources, but they’ve not been well-coordinated to meet these students’ needs.” As I talk to individuals who interact with unaccompanied youth, I hear how insufficient staffing and inadequate capacity is common, and often the bureaucratic nature of school systems makes it difficult to access legal, financial, or mental health services.

In school

Once in school, unaccompanied newcomer youth navigate other constraints, such as low-resources and academic and socio-emotional supports in their schools, lack of quality and culturally sustaining curriculum, and a lack of social workers and counselors with background and language-ability that reflects newcomers’ culture. The constraints they encounter can contribute to a lack of belonging and positive sense of self. As we continue to see newcomers arriving, schools are a major space for socialization and to acquire knowledge and skills. Despite their rich cultural assets, schools do not always capitalize on these.

Anti-immigrant climate and the need for trauma-informed approaches

Even when resources exist, pre- and post-migration trauma, from family separation or fear of immigration raids, persists. While the participants in my research are certainly aware of the needs of immigrant students and families, many school personnel are not, and that puts children at risk. In many of the communities I study, school personnel themselves demonstrate exclusionary beliefs. Anti-immigrant sentiment merely worsens existing trauma, and can deter unaccompanied youth from asking for help, even as they or their families live under the threat of deportation. One educator noted how unaccompanied youth “live with the trauma of having had family members deported since their arrival or from separation during migration.

“They also live in constant fear of being deported. They walk the halls hearing some ignorant staff members [in their schools] calling them ‘illegals or aliens’ or similar references.”

Humane responses and a way forward

A counselor proclaimed in the Mid-Atlantic, “Let’s not pretend these families are not here” as a step toward finding solutions. Rather than give undue attention to the politics and spectacles of flying immigrants to random locations like the Martha’s Vineyard incident, any policy to improve the lives unaccompanied newcomer minors must address the considerable obstacles these youth encounter before and after migrating to the United States, the need for coordinated resources. In other words, actors in education systems and social service must communicate and partner to coordinate efforts.

Broadly, coordination efforts would ensure resources are properly allocated across federal, state, and local educational systems. Some agencies have already been providing guidance for how to enroll unaccompanied students. Further support is needed, such as federal resources, legal assistance, mental health care, and health insurance. From there, school districts can work to improve staffing and service coordination. In many instances, participants shared that the burden of supporting is in the “hands of a few” when it should be the district and schools bearing the load. To be humane toward these young people is to “not pretend they’re not here,” but to welcome and value them.