

Undocumented Students

Adapted from the U.S. Department of Education Resource Guide: Supporting Undocumented Youth.¹



Undocumented students represent one of the most vulnerable groups served by U.S. schools. Estimates indicate that every year 80,000 undocumented youth turn 18 and approximately 65,000 graduate from high school. Just 54% of undocumented youth have at least a high school diploma, compared to 82% of their U.S.-born peers. Further, only 5-10% of undocumented high school graduates continue their education and enroll in an institution of higher education, and far fewer successfully graduate with a degree.

Despite these significant challenges, many undocumented youth have achieved academic success – graduating from two- and four-year higher education institutions and empowering other undocumented youth through mentorship and volunteering. Case studies and testimonials from undocumented youth suggest that one crucial factor in their academic success has been support from family, educators, and other caring adults in their lives. And research has shown that certain environmental factors, such as access to extracurricular activities, advanced coursework, and engaged parents, can boost resiliency among undocumented youth, and are correlated with greater educational attainment. These findings indicate that caring adults can make an impact – that educators, counselors, principals, and specialized instructional support personnel can be the linchpins of success for undocumented students. Studies and surveys of undocumented students have shown that they demonstrate high levels of resilience, leadership, and civic engagement. These positive factors can be further bolstered and nurtured when supportive adults, including educators, are present to help undocumented youth navigate the barriers they face.

Tips for Secondary School Educators, Counselors, and Other Personnel

1. Create Open and Welcoming Environments.
 - a) **Embrace and value diversity and the cultural backgrounds of all students.** Teachers (and other educational personnel) who serve immigrant students should understand the cultural and educational backgrounds of their students. The de-

velopment of trusting relationships with educators is especially important, and affirming attitudes toward students' backgrounds and cultures may help to facilitate greater mutual trust.

Examples:

- Model multicultural sensitivity for students and other personnel. To be effective, cultural competency and advocacy must be implemented on multiple levels; modeling is one approach to achieving this.
- Engage in self-reflection to identify and address personal biases and increase multicultural competence.
- Proactively address bullying or subtle forms of discrimination between peers, education personnel, and others.
- Incorporate discussions around diversity and immigration in instruction.
- Plan and host trainings on multicultural issues that educate teachers and staff about the unique needs and challenges of undocumented students.

b) Withhold judgment and biases about immigration status. Educators and other personnel should not make assumptions about students' immigration status, including assuming that ethnicity or speaking languages other than English imply non-citizen status.

Examples:

- Do not inquire about a student's immigration status. Youth may have legitimate fears about disclosing such information.
- Ensure that all students have access to information about the educational rights of undocumented youth.
- If a youth discloses his or her immigration status, convey openness and an assurance of confidentiality in discussing the topic.
- Keep in mind that some students may not have immigration-related documents that are needed for some school activities, such as field trips across national borders and study-abroad opportunities.

c) Establish safe spaces that allow undocumented youth to share freely, engage with, and lead their peers. Some undocumented youth fear sharing information about their immigration status. For example, one survey found that over 80% of undocumented college students (including many recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals [DACA]² legislation, which allows certain undocumented immi-

grants to receive a renewable two-year deferment of deportation and work authorization if they entered the country before their 16th birthday and have continuously lived in the United States since June 15, 2007, among other requirements) considered the deportation and immigration detention of themselves or family members a major concern. While respecting student privacy, schools and their staff should consider establishing safe spaces where undocumented youth have the opportunity to share, engage with their peers, and build a school-based support system.

Examples:

- Provide support groups for immigrant students and their families, including those who might be undocumented. It may be difficult to garner wide participation in these groups depending on the school culture and openness of undocumented students and families. Ensure broad access by widely promoting this resource to all students and families. School counselors, mentors, and educators may also be able to help provide references to interested youth and families. Individually addressing fears of deportation in a sensitive manner may be needed.
- Work with school or district personnel to establish anti-bullying campaigns and participate in anti-stigma groups, which can develop awareness among all students, parents and educators.

2. Build Staff Capacity and Knowledge About Undocumented Youth.

- a) Learn about the policies and laws affecting undocumented students' access to education.** Educators, counselors, and other personnel are often in trusted positions and can serve as conduits of key information to students and their families. Because policies related to undocumented immigrants and education vary at state and local levels, education personnel can help provide clarity to youth and their families if they are informed about the relevant issues. Too often, educators and counselors lack this information and do not receive any specific training on these issues.

Examples:

- Learn about the DACA policy.
- Learn about relevant state and local legislation that affects undocumented students, including legislation related to access to higher education.
- Work collaboratively to strengthen the multicultural competency of teachers, administrators, and school personnel.

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- Develop and host multicultural trainings and workshops that educate and equip school staff to support undocumented students and their families.
- Provide general information about challenges facing undocumented students to educational personnel through email, handouts, and presentations.
- Inquire about whether your school district receives funds for English Learners (ELs) under Title III, Part A of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA); undocumented students who are ELs are eligible for services under that program.

3. Share Information and Resources with Youth and Families.

- a) Highlight the opportunities that exist to help undocumented youth access postsecondary education.** Though undocumented youth face barriers to college access, educators and counselors can help students to persevere and stay motivated by conveying high expectations, providing extra support, and sharing helpful resources with youth and their families.

Examples:

- Affirm that undocumented students can go to college, but that additional research may be needed because some options and services may not be available to them. If possible, offer to help students with this research.
- Share information on scholarships available for non-citizens. A growing number of private non-profit organizations, foundations, and other entities provide scholarships to undocumented youth and DACA recipients.
- If applicable, encourage scholarship sponsors to change their policies to be inclusive of undocumented students.

- b) Help to connect undocumented youth and their families to community resources and stakeholder organizations for more support.** Coordination with community organizations can help provide a more cohesive system of support for undocumented youth and their families, connecting them to local resources and service providers.

Examples:

- Develop a coordinated outreach plan with immigrant youth-led organizations, advocacy groups, and other community-based organizations to support undocumented students and their families holistically.

- Undocumented students may gain valuable socio-emotional support and access to resources by participating in advocacy organizations, especially those led by immigrant youth themselves, in their local communities or at institutions of higher education.
- Collaborate with youth-serving agencies in your community.
- Encourage students to explore whether they are eligible for other pathways to citizenship.

c) Share information with undocumented youth and families about DACA consideration and renewal and support students' requests for education records.

When youth are requesting consideration for DACA, help to ensure that they seek information from official government sources such as United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) or the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). If youth are interested in seeking legal advice, recommend that they visit [USCIS's Find Legal Services](#) page. Most young people request consideration for DACA without needing any legal advice but for some, the process may be more challenging and legal assistance may be needed.

Examples:

- Provide students with information about how to obtain their education records.
- Provide migrant students and families information about the availability of records through the MSIX system, a web-based platform that links states' student record systems to enable a national exchange of educational and health information for migratory children who are eligible for the Migrant Education Program (MEP) under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).
- If requested, share materials regarding the process for attaining citizenship within the United States.
- Collaborate with trusted community-based organizations to answer undocumented students' questions regarding pathways to citizenship.

4. Actively Engage Families and Community Organizations.

- a) Be empathetic and build positive relationships with undocumented youth and their families.** Enter relationships with youth with a positive mindset; be consistently encouraging and willing to listen. Strive to establish trust with families as well as youth.

Examples:

- Understand the stress and other feelings undocumented youth and their families may experience.

When undocumented students trust their teachers or counselors, they may feel comfortable enough to reach out for help when they need it. This connection provides an opportunity to give support to ensure that students do not have to face challenges alone.

b) Engage families of undocumented youth by ensuring communications are in a language and format that is understandable to parents.

Examples:

- Investigate broader translation and online documents written in multiple languages that can enhance a school's or campus's multicultural sensitivity.
- Hire personnel who are multilingual and have completed the requisite training as a translator or interpreter.

c) Be proactive and create frequent, flexible engagement opportunities for families. Research has shown that undocumented youth attribute the support of actively engaged parents and families to helping them achieve academically and build resilience. Education personnel should approach relationships with families with openness and an aim to establish trust, acknowledging that this may be challenging for undocumented or mixed-status families.

Examples:

- Arrange office hours that will facilitate access to all families, including those of undocumented students. Stepping outside of traditional roles may help to build a trusting, therapeutic relationship with students and families.
- Discuss and reflect cultural understanding of the expectations for undocumented students by their families. Acknowledge that some families may have differing perspectives on postsecondary education, while still communicating its value.

d) Leverage the leadership of undocumented college students and the community to engage and support undocumented youth. Undocumented youth who have successfully entered higher education have been shown to exhibit high levels of civic engagement and commitment to community service. These young

leaders have the potential to be engaging and knowledgeable role models for undocumented youth in secondary school or college.

Examples:

- Create safe opportunities for undocumented students in secondary schools and at local institutions of higher education to serve as role models in the community.
- Host events that empower and put youth voices on display; these can be opportunities to raise awareness and support positive youth development.
- Connect community members with similar backgrounds (community activists, church members, undocumented college students, etc.) to serve as mentors for youth; these individuals may provide culturally responsive and sensitive insight to the challenges undocumented students experience.

5. Provide Additional Academic Supports to Undocumented Youth, If Needed.

- a) Support undocumented youth and families in navigating the higher education admissions process.** The admissions process for postsecondary institutions can be tough for undocumented youth. Undocumented students often must wade through state, local, and institutional policies when deciding to which higher education institutions they should apply and eventually attend. Counselors and educators can play important supportive roles for undocumented youth by helping them apply for college and determine financial aid options.

Examples:

- Walk through the higher education admissions process with undocumented youth to help them gain familiarity with key steps and important deadlines, and check in with them regarding their follow-through on key tasks.
- Provide support as students work to fulfill the application requirements for academic essays and letters of recommendation.
- Engage parents and keep them involved during the college application and admissions experience, acknowledging that they may lack familiarity with these processes.
- Coordinate with local community colleges and other institutions to hold college tours and information sessions.

- b) Provide ongoing support and individual help beyond the college application and admissions process.** Ensure students have the opportunity to receive on-

going mentoring and advice, such as by connecting them to services available at community organizations or with other undocumented youth who may lead campus or stakeholder groups.

- c) **Advocate for dual enrollment opportunities that are open to all secondary school students regardless of citizenship status.** While dual enrollment may increase engagement and access to rigorous coursework for all students, anecdotal evidence suggests that it poses a particular benefit for undocumented students.

Example:

- Promote dual enrollment in college courses during secondary school as a cost-saving college preparation strategy for undocumented youth, in particular.

References

- ¹ U.S. Department of Education. (2015, October 20). *Resource guide: Supporting undocumented youth*. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/supporting-undocumented-youth.pdf>
- ² U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. (2016, January 04). *Consideration of deferred action for childhood arrivals (DACA)*. Retrieved from <https://www.uscis.gov/humanitarian/consideration-deferred-action-childhood-arrivals-daca>

Resources

- **Department of Homeland Security**
<http://www.dhs.gov>
- **U.S. Department of Education**
<http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/immigration-resources.html>
- **U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services**
<http://uscis.gov>
- **U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Find Legal Services**
<http://uscis.gov/avoid-scams/find-legal-services>