

Central Falls schools fear impact of immigration changes under Trump

Wednesday

Posted Jan 25, 2017 at 11:14 PM

Charter schools are also making resources available, such as lawyers with immigration expertise, to help families navigate the unknowns in the new administration.

By **Linda Borg**
Journal Staff Writer

[Follow](#)

CENTRAL FALLS, R.I. - Students at one charter school here are playing a very scary game called "Trump's coming! Run and Hide!" Some families are afraid to drive because they lack proper documentation. Others are reluctant to seek medical care. Students are joking, halfheartedly, that they will be deported.

As President Donald Trump prepares to make changes in immigration policy, unlikely allies - charter schools and district schools - are joining hands to inform families of their rights and keep students safe.

In December, a community-wide "know your rights" forum was attended by Mayor James Diossa, school district officials and area charter school representatives, law enforcement and more than 150 families.

The Learning Community, a K-8 charter school in the city, organized a schoolwide "day of action" Friday in which community leaders were invited to hear middle school students present their research on issues related to the immigrant experience.

And the Learning Community has developed a model "safe school policy" that outlines what information schools will protect (or not even collect) to preserve the status of undocumented families. Traditional school districts, including Central Falls and Pawtucket, are thinking of adopting this guidance.

"Our kids are very afraid," said Sarah Friedman, co-director of the Learning Community. "We are an almost 90 percent immigrant school. Our families come from 39 different countries."

There's a reason this kind of collaboration is happening here. Central Falls is small. The city now has a Hispanic majority. More than a third of its population are immigrants. And the city has a history of district schools and charter schools working together.

"It's so small, people are really interconnected and we have histories with each other beyond whatever organization we're a part of right now and that history is strong and is rooted in wanting the best for our children and our families," Friedman said.

Charter schools that serve mostly immigrant families are also having conversations with their faculty to sensitize them about what their students have experienced. Some arrived here as refugees from violent civil wars. Others were imprisoned on their way to the United States. Others have been separated from their families or have seen relatives deported.

On the day after Trump's election, Angelo Garcia, who runs the Segue Charter School, talked with his staff. His message: This school is a safe place. We're not giving anyone any information.

Segue is also trying to turn students' anxieties about deportation into teachable moments, talking about their rights and listening to their fears.

Charter schools are also making resources available, such as lawyers with immigration expertise, to help families navigate the unknowns in the new administration.

"The most important question is: are we standing at the ready, as citizens, as a school community, to stand up for every member of our community," said Jeremy Chiappetta, the executive director of the Blackstone Valley Prep charter

school, which serves students in Central Falls. "The answer is: absolutely."

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that undocumented immigrants have a right to attend public school and that schools cannot request status information from families. The Obama administration set aside certain locations as "safety zones" to prevent raids by immigration officials. Schools are among them.

Central Falls isn't alone. The Providence School Department has distributed a statement that says schools cannot call for the disclosure of a family's immigration status, inquire about that status or require Social Security numbers of a student or his or her family. The letter also provides a list of agencies where families can seek legal advice.

In Pawtucket, City Councilwoman Sandra Cano, a Colombian immigrant and former School Committee member, said city and school officials are beginning to discuss what they can do to keep families informed and safe.

"We're standing together for diversity, for equality, regardless of where the family comes from, regardless of their race, their socio-economic status," she said. At the Central Falls forum last month, she said, "it was great to see so many people speaking up on behalf of those who are silent, who have no voice."

-lborg@providencejournal.com

(401) 277-7823

On Twitter: @lborgprojocom