

SAFE ZONE

Schools offer help and refuge to
students in the aftermath of ICE raids

Glenn Cook



Morton interpreter Luis Antonio Hernandez

Luis Antonio Hernandez is always in a hurry, even when he's sitting in the principal's office. The former Navy combat medic has about 15 minutes before he teaches his end-of-day "nerd stuff" lesson to elementary school students.

"I've got second-graders that expect their 'Star Wars,'" says Hernandez, a Spanish-language interpreter for Mississippi's Morton Elementary School, which serves almost 700 students in grades K-4. "You don't want to come between them and their 'Star Wars.'"

Hernandez and his co-workers know the value of routine for students in this small community, especially since Aug. 7, when 680 workers living in the U.S. without legal permission were detained statewide in the largest Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raid in U.S. history. Almost half of those workers were arrested at two Morton food processing plants; within a week, another 100 workers at one of the plants were laid off without notice.

More than 11 million immigrants are believed to be in the U.S. illegally, and a 2017 report from The Annie E. Casey Foundation estimates that at least 5 million children have at least one parent who is living in the U.S. without legal permission. Those numbers, combined with threats of increased enforcement by ICE, present a variety of safety, societal, and communications challenges for school districts. Researchers say children traumatized by the raids are at increased risk of mental and physical health issues, including anxiety and difficulty sleeping and eating, which in turn can lead to poor school performance and issues with attendance.

"We often talk about educators on the front lines of dealing with so many of the social problems that our children face, but this has really been exacerbated in this environment," says Thomas Dee, a researcher at Stanford University who studies the effect of immigration enforcement on student attendance. "There is such a pervasive fear and anxiety among parents that they'll take their kids to school one day and not be there to pick them up later. If the school is the source of things like meals or access to health care, that results in additional harm to children. No one wins in something like this."

But, school officials note, stability already is on shaky ground every day for the children of such immigrants in small towns like Morton, located 40 miles east of Jackson and off Interstate 20 in central Mississippi.

"The ICE raids didn't cause the poor conditions our kids are living in," says Tony McGee, superintendent of Scott County Schools, which serves students in Morton and three other communities. "Poor conditions are part of their daily lives. This just brought to the forefront for us that our kids are in great need, more need than we already knew."

IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

Chicken is king in Scott County, and the demand for low-cost labor has resulted in a large influx of immigrants moving to Morton from Guatemala, Mexico, and South America over the past two decades. Until the raids, most worked for either Koch Foods or PH Food, the town's two poultry processing plants. Koch, which saw 234 of its employees detained in the Aug. 7 raid, produces more than 700,000 tons of chicken products annually in Morton.

As Morton's student population has diversified — the middle school now is divided evenly among white, Hispanic/Latino, and African-American children — managing this historically low-income county school district has become more complex as well. Run for decades by an elected superintendent and appointed school board that kept taxes well below the state average, the 4,200-student district was taken over by the state in 2014 for violating 27 of 31 accreditation standards.

McGee, hired in July 2015 as the district's first appointed superintendent, and his staff have worked to increase the tax base and find ways to provide more wraparound services to students and families. The millage rate, while still below the state average, has increased each year. With help from the state, Scott County provides free breakfast and lunch to every student, and the district received a grant to give meals to Morton's children this past summer as well.

"I want us to be servant leaders for our schools," McGee says. "The face of Morton has changed over time. The type of citizen in Morton has changed. We as a school district and community have to change, too. We don't just enroll the child. We enroll the family. Our reach goes beyond the classroom walls."

That calm, encompassing, and compassionate approach, McGee and others believe, is key to restoring a sense of normal in a traumatic time. And it started soon after the raids began.

The school had interpreters in the front office within a few minutes after parents and family members started checking students out. Bus drivers were told to make eye contact with an adult before dropping off a student. Shortly before sunset, a bus rode through the entire community to make sure no one was missed.

"This is about the importance of relationships," Principal MaryLynn Crotwell says. "From the moment the parent registers the child at school, that relationship has to be ongoing. When they release them to us, we continue that communication with our parents. Even if we're not communicating with the same language, they know me, and I know them."

The next day, 154 Hispanic students were absent from

Morton, Mississippi, student Aron and his sister.



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school. The district called and texted every parent. If they could not make contact, staff went out to the neighborhoods. Food and other resources were delivered to homes that weekend; since then, the local Methodist church has taken over that effort.

“Over and over again, we heard, ‘As long as I can find work, I don’t need any help,’” says Regina Biggers, the district’s elementary curriculum coordinator. “No one was looking for a handout. They were all saying they were OK and that they would let us know when they weren’t. We told them if there’s something they don’t need to bring it back, but we made sure they had something.”

On the Monday after the raids, all but one of the absent children had returned to class.

SCHOOL IS A SAFE ZONE

As the new student services coordinator for Arkansas’ Springdale Public Schools, Damon Donnell wants to be prepared should an ICE raid occur. Springdale is home to the national headquarters of Tyson Foods, JB Hunt, and Wal-Mart. Fears of increased immigration enforcement are real in his town.

Springdale has a student population that ranges from 50 percent to 75 percent Hispanic. Donnell has talked to a number of districts where raids occurred so that Springdale can be prepared to react.

“The end game is to have a process in place for all administrators to follow,” says Donnell, who has spoken with McGee, among others.

Among the lessons he’s learned: Have extra interpreters available at a moment’s notice; clearly communicate to staff, students, and parents what you know throughout the process; and provide training on how to work with traumatized students and families post-raid.

“What we’re looking to do is find a way to train our teachers and front-office staff so they keep calm, not panic, and remain level-headed,” Donnell says. “If you look at a traumatic event, you know that kids can’t really learn for a period of time, so it’s always great to be reminded of the

importance of followup afterward.”

In Las Cruces, New Mexico, which faced a 60 percent increase in absences following a February 2017 ICE raid in the community, the 24,700-student district has since taken several steps to reassure parents that their children are safe in school. The school board no longer collects information about the immigration status of its students, and ICE agents can’t be on school grounds without warrants.

“The goal was to reassure the community that we as a school system do not discriminate against a student’s immigration status,” says Roberto Lozano, the district’s associate superintendent of equity, innovation, and social justice. “We want our families to know, especially those who’ve been directly impacted, that school is a safe zone for our students, and we are here to support them in any way we can.”

Lozano says Las Cruces, located 75 miles from the border between the U.S. and Mexico, has many students who stay with a family member during the week and go back to Mexico on the weekends.

Las Cruces has implemented a social and emotional learning curriculum that focuses on trauma-informed care for students who experience family separation. The district has added staff at its international welcome centers located at each middle and high school and created a director of mental health position to organize and align its programs.

“We try to address the different needs of our students, because we recognize that their basic needs must be met before they can be ready to learn,” Lozano says. “If we can’t meet that, then they can’t be learning, and the quality of education will just go down the drain.”

HOME AND SCHOOL

Like many children of immigrants, 14-year-old Aron straddles the worlds of home and school. Home is a small brick structure off a single-lane paved road where he lives with his parents and two siblings, a 6-year-old sister and an infant brother. All three children were born in the U.S. to parents who moved from Guatemala when they were just teenagers.

Down the road, past houses damaged or leveled when a tornado ripped through Morton in March, is Bettye Mae Jack Middle School. It's where Aron, an eighth-grader, works toward his dream of becoming a doctor, lawyer, or soldier.

Standing in his front yard late on a warm September afternoon, Aron and his sister are still trying to understand the gravity of what happened the month before. Both are excited about school — Aron's sister particularly likes the centers that focus on reading — but worried about their parents and their immediate future.

"We can't go anywhere now," says Aron, whose name was changed to protect his family's identity. "So many of my friends have been left without their dads or both parents are gone. No one knows what's going to happen."

His mother speaks mostly in Spanish as she describes how her "heaven life" had been turned upside down. She and her husband had worked in Morton's two plants since following family to Mississippi in 2006, having been hired with only their IDs from Guatemala and no other paperwork.

"They thought nothing could happen because they've been here for so long," Aron says, listening to his mother and interpreting for her. "They work here and send money back to their parents in Guatemala to help them. They were just working and working and never thought about it. No one asked for their papers."

Aron's father was off from work the morning of the raids and was not taken into custody, but he was part of the layoffs the following week at PH Food. Unable to return to work without proof he is in the U.S. legally, Aron's father does yard work and odd jobs to earn "a little cash money."

Two uncles and a cousin, all long-time residents of Morton, weren't so lucky. The three men were still in detention in late September. Their eight children were in the care of Aron's aunt. Now more than ever, the family relies on the school breakfasts and lunches as well as on food that Scott County officials have brought to them. They worry about foreclosure on their homes, a common occurrence following ICE raids.

"When we do home visits, you see the living conditions. Some families don't have lights. When you're bringing in food, refrigerators are very bare," Biggers says. "It's amazing how many times I've taken food into a house and it feels like Christmas time. They're so excited about that food."

When she says this, you can see tears in her eyes.

ALWAYS

Sitting in a diner outside Morton on a Saturday morning, McGee is philosophical about what has happened in his district. ICE has been criticized for not letting the schools know about the raids in advance, but he says he understands that "some things are above our pay grade."

That said, he notes the irony between the first and second days of school. The first day, teachers asked children about their future career dreams and took pictures of them holding up a sign with the phrase: "This is what I want to be."

"We have four pictures of Hispanic children saying, 'I want to be a policeman.' They want to protect and serve," he says. "The next day, when you get that call that the policeman has taken your mom or dad, how do you think that's going to make you feel? There has to be some way to help our kids absorb and learn from that."

Assistant Superintendent Chad Harrison says the district is continuing to "watch and monitor and wait and see what is needed" as the school year progresses. "We've made a vocal effort to make sure they are cared about and loved, and now we've got to start getting back to a routine," he says. "The support we've had from the Hispanic community and the trust they have shown in our people at the school level has shown me that our efforts are paying off, that we are providing a safe environment for kids."

Hernandez, the "Star Wars" teacher and interpreter, is an American national born in the Dominican Republic. He moved to Scott County when he was 12 and attended two high schools in the district before joining the Navy. After his discharge, a former teacher mentioned the school was seeking a paraprofessional who could be an interpreter. Soon after, Hernandez was hired for his "anything goes" role.

"I didn't know I had a passion for this, man," he says. "But I'm a child at heart. I've been here for six years, and I've never thought about leaving a single time. How could I leave these kids? How could anybody leave them?"

Asked about how students are responding following the raids, he pauses for a moment. "They are adapting. In all honesty, that's the most important thing. Yes, it happened. Yes, it was bad. But what can you do? You have to move forward and push on. That's what they're here for. That's what we're here for. And we're going to be here for them. Always."

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