# THE FEAR is everywhere

## U.S. High School Principals Report Widespread Effects of Immigration Enforcement

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with the Democracy and Education Research Team

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Immigrant students are suffering the most. Chronic absenteeism, post-traumatic stress disorder, and anxiety are interfering with their opportunities for success. They and their families live in a culture of fear. In several cases, students and their families received email notice from DHS indicating that they had 15 days to self deport because they were from XXX and their visa was discontinued without cause. These were hardworking, contributing members of our community.

**Stacy Costa,**[1] High School Principal in New York

We certainly saw a handful of students sort of echo some of the rhetoric that was used either during the election cycle or post-election results, around ... students that they perceived as immigrants.

**Erica Diaz,** High School Principal in Texas

You hear things. So when a kid says, 'Yeah, I'm a little worried, and yeah, I don't really want my mom and dad to go out and drive right now, because I don't know what's going to happen,' or you're sitting at a table with kids, and you're just chatting about life in general, and one of the kids looks to the kid next to him and says, 'Just make sure you have your ID with you.' To pretend it's not impacting our students would be not a truthful statement. Because it does.

**Stan Marino,** High School Principal in Wisconsin

We have seen the negative impact of the increased ICE presence and negative rhetoric around immigrants. Hardworking families who have been in our community for years have been torn apart by a family member being taken from their home or on the street, ICE agents using intimidation tactics around the school. Staff getting involved in taking students home or supporting them while their family struggles. Students staying home for fear of coming to school. There is something just so fundamentally wrong about this—we continue to strive to make school a safe place where all students can thrive, but this task has become increasingly challenging.

**Nancy Wagner,** High School Principal in Massachusetts

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These are a few voices of high school principals who participated in a national study we conducted in summer of 2025. The study asked high school principals about their schools' efforts to educate for democracy in the 2024–2025 school year amidst a broad set of social and political pressures. While principals highlighted an array of challenges facing their schools, the issue that drew far and away the most attention was the impact of immigration enforcement on their students and their communities.

Given the Trump administration's massive and vigorous efforts to expand deportation, it is not surprising that U.S. public schools and their students have been affected. Political rhetoric attacking immigrant communities was a centerpiece of Donald Trump's presidential campaign and has continued into his presidency.[2] In national polling, immigrants report feeling unsafe at home and in their communities.[3] These dynamics are particularly significant for public schools because, in 1982, the Supreme Court ruled in *Plyler v. Doe* that undocumented students have a constitutional right to attend public schools in the United States.[4] While this legal right remains, concerns are growing about whether public schools remain safe zones.

One of the first official acts of the second Trump administration was an executive order that rescinded long-standing guidance restricting immigration enforcement in and around "sensitive locations" such as schools, churches, hospitals, and courthouses.[5] Following this order, the Trump administration increased the scale and scope of enforcement, with the number of detentions and deportations rising every month.[6] These efforts, particularly actions that have brought national guard or federal troops to U.S. cities, have drawn heightened concern in and beyond immigrant communities.

Across the nation, a substantial proportion of K–12 public school students have a direct and pressing interest in the well-being of undocumented immigrants. Approximately 5 million children in the United States live in homes with at least one undocumented parent.[7] Previous studies have found that, during Trump's first administration, students living in such households experienced heightened stress and absenteeism and decreased academic performance.[8] Initial analyses of data from the first months of the second Trump administration point to similar declines in attendance within immigrant communities in California's Central Valley[9] and Rhode Island and Connecticut.[10] Further, a number of journalistic accounts in 2025 have reported increased student stress and absenteeism in many immigrant communities across the United States.[11]

This report aims to deepen our understanding of the educational impact of intensified immigration enforcement during the first months of the second Trump administration. Drawing on a nationally representative survey of 606 high school principals, we assess how schools across the United States were affected by enforcement efforts in the latter half of the 2024–2025 school year. We consider four questions:

1. **How widely felt, across U.S. public high schools, were concerns of students from immigrant families about their well-being and the well-being of their families?**
2. **How widely experienced, across U.S. public high schools, were declines in the attendance and learning of students from immigrant families?**
3. **How widely endured, across U.S. public high schools, were incidents of bullying directed toward students from immigrant families?**
4. **What actions did educators across U.S. public high schools take to address the needs of students from immigrant families?**

Our responses to these questions emerge from data we collected from U.S. public high school principals in the summer of 2025. We conducted an online survey between June and August 2025 with 606 principals that included items asking principals about the possible impact of immigration enforcement at their school. The survey also queried principals about possible actions by school staff to meet the needs of students from immigrant families. Further, some principals chose to write about issues related to immigration enforcement in the open-ended question at the close of the survey. In addition to the survey, we conducted 49 follow-up interviews in July, August, and early September with a cross-section of principals who participated in the survey. These interviews addressed an array of topics related to educating for democracy amidst social and political pressures during the 2024–2025 school year and included a question that invited principals to speak to whether and how their school had been affected by immigration enforcement and how they and their staff had responded. (A more detailed description of our survey and interviews can be found in our methodological appendix.)

This report is intended to provide a timely portrait of the broad impact of immigration enforcement across U.S. public schools. High school principals are well positioned to identify challenges facing their school communities. By gathering data from principals who lead a nationally representative set of public schools, we document broad patterns playing out across the United States. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that this study is limited in scope. Our data examine experiences of U.S. public high schools during a particular period of time—the latter half of the 2024–2025 school year. Many school systems in the United States completed their year before the Trump administration advanced its most aggressive and intensive immigration enforcement actions. Future studies are needed to document the ongoing effects of such actions.

In the remainder of this report, we take up each of the four research questions, presenting results from the survey as well as from the interviews with 49 principals from all parts of the country. Our analysis aims to illuminate the profound challenges of advancing the goals of U.S. public schooling—supporting learning and democratic education for all—in a moment of intensive immigration enforcement. *(Since participants in our study were promised anonymity, we use pseudonyms for all principals named in this report.)*

# “It’s this fear”

SUSAN THOMPSON is the principal of a large high school in Tennessee that enrolls students whose families were born across the globe. Ms. Thompson embraces this diversity and aims to ensure that everyone “feel[s] included in a school this big.” Thompson acknowledges that her students face a number of stresses related to the political environment. Yet, “despite what they see in the world, they just still have that positive light and that spirit.” Thompson understands her own role as “protecting” this spirit, and creating “safe spaces” where her students can “be good and do good things.”

Immigration enforcement efforts in spring 2025 made it more difficult for Ms. Thompson and her staff to protect and support students. When Homeland Security officials visited a student’s residence, the home surveillance video was circulated on social media, creating widespread concern in the school and surrounding community. Subsequent rumors about ICE officers preparing to raid local workplaces and schools led many immigrant families to remain in their homes. School attendance dropped. Ms. Thompson recounts: “People that were undocumented … felt they would be targeted for whatever reason.” In a climate of pervasive fear, students with undocumented family members have been unsure about whether the school was still a safe place. “I think it’s this fear that a lot of our students feel like they can’t trust the government, trust any sort of entity of the government.”

Ms. Thompson has tried to foster a belief that the school remains a protected place in a precarious moment. She has shared district guidelines outlining what she and her staff will do if ICE officials show up at school. And Ms. Thompson has worked with her staff to “create spaces” in advisory class where students are encouraged to “unpack” what is happening to themselves and their classmates. She explains: “There have been fears, for example, about Hispanic students being deported, or things around immigration, and so, rather than pretending that’s not happening, we talk about it.” Importantly, advisory discussions are grounded in a set of school norms—“We are staying respectful … all students are able to speak, nobody is dominating conversation.”

“These are very trying times for a principal to lead a high school of young people who are coming of age,” notes Ms. Thompson. She believes the broader environment poses difficult leadership challenges for principals: “I really don’t want schools politicized, and I know they are.” Ms. Thompson hopes to protect young people and “teach kids about being … ethical [and] good.” She also is committed to doing so “without pushing my beliefs on them.” Reflecting on these dilemmas, Ms. Thompson concludes: “That’s been the way I lead. I don’t have all the answers, neither does the world, because the stuff we’re dealing with is unprecedented, weird, crazy, strange—it makes no sense, some of it. But we do the best we can. I mean, that’s the way I lead, is I do the very best I can.”

## Finding 1:

### More than ⅔ of U.S. public high schools were impacted due to heightened concerns of students from immigrant families about their well-being and the well-being of their families.

70.4% of principals in our survey reported that "[s]tudents from immigrant families have expressed concerns about their well-being or the well-being of their families due to policies or political rhetoric related to immigrants." Principals frequently spoke about the fear and anxiety many of their students are experiencing. Several immigrant parents in Cindy Brandt's school in Florida have confided, "My child is afraid to come to school." In California, principal Anthony Bianchi related that his students "watch the news and see what's going on" and then wonder as they head off to school: "Is it gonna be the last time" we see our parents? As one school leader commented, "This is not a fear or a pressure that any young person should carry."

**70.4%**

**% OF U.S. HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS reporting:**

**"Students from immigrant families have expressed concerns about their well-being or the well-being of their families due to policies or political rhetoric related to immigrants."**

Many principals described a climate of distress within their communities. An Idaho principal reported that migrant workers who are parents of his students have been "afraid to go to school … afraid to come in." Principal Veronica Alvarez in Texas explained: "Immigration changes have placed these families on high alert and in fear of their safety." Many principals, such as Nicole Johnson in Tennessee, pointed out that immigrant parents have been forced to shelter in their homes to avoid encountering ICE officers, and this has meant that they have not been able "to go to the grocery store, so the students weren't eating properly." Reflecting on these troubling conditions, Principal Cinthya Rodriguez in California concluded: "I'm watching our families live in a certain level of fear beyond what we experienced in COVID. I mean COVID was fear, right? This is a whole different level of fear."

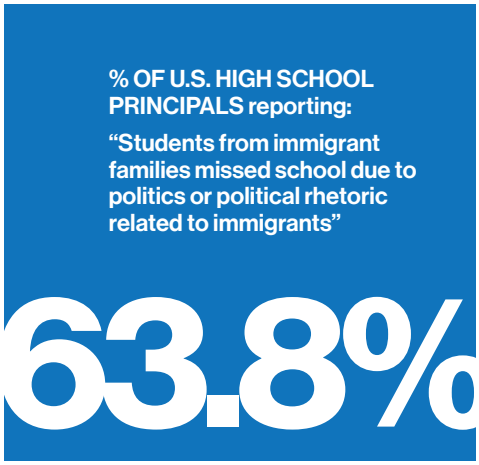
## Finding 2:

### A strong majority of U.S. public high schools experienced declines in the attendance and learning of students from immigrant families.

The fear and concern pervading immigrant communities has had a substantial impact on school participation and learning. A majority of principals (57.8%) reported that "[i]mmigrant parents and guardians" left the community during the school year. In some instances, students moved with their parents, and hence were unable to finish the school year. A Nebraska principal shared: "I had quite a few students and their families leave right at Christmas break and said, 'We're going back to Mexico, we aren't coming back.'" A few principals told us that they were unsure what had happened to a few of their students from immigrant families. "We had a couple of students that I'm sorry to say that just stopped coming, and we didn't know what happened to them," said Michigan principal Michael Becker. He added: "There were rumors that they had left the country and/or gone to a different area of the country where they felt safer."

Almost ⅔ of principals across the nation (63.8%) reported that "students from immigrant families missed school due to policies or political rhetoric related to immigrants." These declines in attendance occurred as schools have been making herculean efforts to rebuild attendance rates shaken by the COVID pandemic. California princi-

pal Erica Park told us: “This is a vicious cycle, right? We need them at school to serve them and make sure that they’re taken care of—which was the case that we couldn’t do during the pandemic. That’s why we lost so many kids.” She adds: “I worry about that.”




Many principals highlighted a direct relationship between immigration enforcement efforts and the drop-off in attendance of students from immigrant families. A principal in Georgia noted “a decline in some of our enrollment and attendance that we do attribute to the population having a very real fear of being detained.” Principal Sean Green in Washington DC specified that, “due to federal action on immigration … the daily attendance rate of our immigrant students [fell] by approximately 10% compared to last year.” Principals in Texas, New Mexico, and Wisconsin all pointed to a fall-off in attendance following President Trump’s inauguration. As Norton Baker in Wisconsin recounted, “They [students from immigrant families] didn’t know what was going to happen.” Several principals explained that some student absences occurred because teenagers had to take on new responsibilities in light of caregivers being detained or sheltering at home. Principal Deborah Stewart in California shared that some of her students “stopped coming to school as regularly” because they didn’t want to leave their very young siblings alone at home.

A few principals we interviewed in July and August told us that, amidst increased immigration enforcement, some students from immigrant families “opted out of summer school.” Principal Andrea Meyer, whose Minnesota school serves a large number of migrant families, reported: “We definitely saw a significant drop in enrollment this summer, and we are 100% positive it is due to the political happenings in our country right now.”

## Finding 3:

## More than ⅓ of U.S. public high schools experienced incidents of bullying directed toward students from immigrant families.

More than ⅓ of U.S. high school principals (35.6%) acknowledged that “[s]tudents from immigrant families have reported that they have been bullied or harassed” at their school. A principal in Minnesota told us: “There has been definitely an uptick in comments made by white students, white male students, to our Hispanic students: ‘Can I see your papers?’ Somebody said that.” In Nebraska, principal Oscar Jensen noted that there has been a general increase in his students’ use of hostile and derogatory language. But, he added: “It was more of honestly the Hispanic population that got the brunt of it when it came to, “Go back home,” things like that. Just those type of rhetorics and words and comments.” Some principals reasoned that such bullying directed at students from immigrant families emerges from a political climate that has normalized attacks on immigrant communities. Speaking of this climate, Christina Horvath in Michigan shared: “The biggest impact I can speak to is other students making inappropriate comments … even [when] talking to their friends … ‘You’re a border hopper, your parents are border hoppers, [and] go back where you came from.’” While she has taken disciplinary action against this bullying, principal Horvath remains concerned about the long-term impact on students and on the broader school community.

# "They got that rhetoric from home or the President"

JENNIFER DURAN leads a mid-size high school in Texas that she describes as "predominantly white," socioeconomically mixed, and home to a small minority of students from immigrant families. Ms. Duran places a strong emphasis on fostering a sense of community on her diverse campus. "I am big on relationships and we're just really preaching kindness and caring." Many students make a point of watching out for and supporting classmates who are struggling to fit in, experiencing anxiety, or feeling unsafe. Generally, Ms. Duran notes, "we have really good kids." But, recently, the political climate has introduced new tensions and fissures.

After President Trump took office, Ms. Duran observed that a number of immigrant parents "were very, very concerned." A parent shared with her: "I'm going to put him on the bus and send him to school, but is he going to make it home?" Student attendance dropped on a few occasions when "parents had gotten wind that this could be a day that ICE would come to our school." While no immigration enforcement action occurred at her school site, Ms. Duran acknowledges that the actions of ICE in other Texas communities meant that the parents' "fears were legitimate."

Ms. Duran had hoped that district leaders would help ease distress within her community by communicating the district's commitment to protect immigrant families. She informed district leaders that parents had requested that the district issue a statement and host a town hall to explain their plans and listen to family members But, even though Ms. Duran "asked several times," district leadership "never put out a letter home to parents saying, 'This is where we stand.'" Nor did district leaders hold public meetings to discuss the concerns of immigrant families.

Alongside enforcement efforts, prevailing political rhetoric about immigrants has made it more difficult for Ms. Duran and her staff to foster a sense of belonging and care amongst the student body. Students from immigrant families, she points out, now experience stress from "living in this country" that is "telling them we don't want them." Messages conveyed through political rhetoric are nowhere near as hurtful for these students as hate speech from classmates. Ms. Duran recounted: "We had some students that reported that some of their peers were saying, 'Go home, you don't belong here.' And that hadn't been their experience before—until this administration." Students told her: "I've known this kid since 3rd grade, and he's never called me names, never said go back to Mexico." Ms. Duran adds: "They got that rhetoric from home or the President."

Amidst this increasingly tense and contentious climate, Ms. Duran and her staff respond forcefully to bullying and hate speech and make great efforts to nurture care and understanding. "We've been really intentional, like with our morning announcements: 'Hey, check on your people.' Just reminding kids, like, kindness is everything. You don't know what people are carrying." For Ms. Duran, the role of public schools in building empathy is both more challenging and more important than ever before. "We're just really trying to get people to be good humans and think about other people."

## Finding 4:

## The vast majority of U.S. public high schools have taken actions to address the needs of students from immigrant families as best they can.

How did U.S. public high school educators respond to intensified immigration enforcement? More than ¾ of principals (77.6%) report that they have "[c]reated a school plan to respond to visits from federal agents." Principal Oscar Jensen in Nebraska told us: "As a public school, we recognize that societal and political issues, such as the deportation of undocumented individuals, can have a significant impact on our students and families. Our school has a thoughtful plan in place to address these challenges with compassion and care, focusing on the well-being and success of every student." Some principals, such as Dennis Thompson in North Carolina, reported that their district created plans that were distributed to school sites. Other principals developed their own school plans in partnerships with district officials.

Nearly half (47.2%) of principals reported that they have "[c]reated a school plan to address student needs if parents or guardians experience deportation." This figure is striking given the terror and sense of dislocation young people are sure to experience if their parents are detained and they are left to fend for themselves. Many principals we spoke with recognized the extraordinary impact of such an outcome and tried their best to develop plans that would ease the trauma. Texas principal Erica Diaz explained: "We trained staff and worked with some of our families to sort of have a 'Plan B'—Student goes home after school, or after an extracurricular activity, and their parents aren't there, and they find out later that they've been picked up by ICE. Like, what's the plan? We did work with families to sort of just set up contingency plans so that hopefully that never happens, but if it did, the student doesn't have to figure out in that moment 'Who am I calling? Who am I staying with? Who's helping me get dinner? Like, what do I do with school?' "

Almost half of principals (44.8%) reported that they have "[c]reated professional development for staff on how to support students from immigrant families." For example, Noreen Stevens in Minnesota described how her school "spent time as a staff … focusing on the issue of deportation and ICE," and developing plans to "make sure students feel safe at school." In addition, a broad cross-section of principals noted partnerships with organizations outside their school district that support immigrant families. More than half of principals (57.3%) reported that their school partnered with "[community-based organizations who support students." ⅓ of principals 33.1%) reported that they have "[c]onnected students with legal services." In some cases, principals drew upon informal networks. For example, principals in California and Texas shared that they connected immigrant families with a parent at their school who happened to be an attorney. And some principals, like Megan Reese in Texas, took steps to meet the financial needs of families in their community who lost income due to immigration enforcement. "We set up meal trains, different things to try to help them." Similarly, a California principal shared: "We started a Gofundme page to help support the girls pay for the rent of their apartment, because their mom was a food vendor, and that's how she made money to care for her children in her household."

# "It's a lot"

NANCY LEE is principal of a small California high school located in a predominantly immigrant neighborhood. The school is deeply connected to its community. Lee and her staff work closely with local businesses and non-profit organizations that offer students apprenticeships and extra-curricular programming. Educators apply lessons in "science and engineering and math" to neighborhood issues and concerns. Placing the community at the center of the curriculum has motivated students' academic performance in the past. But now, amidst heightened immigration enforcement, insecurity in the surrounding community is being felt intensely within the school.

Ms. Lee recalls the precise moment in spring 2025 when the school's sense of safety and celebration of academic achievement was breached. During a whole-school assembly, she began to receive texts informing her of ICE raids a few miles away—the first large-scale enforcement actions in the region. Due to rules prohibiting cell phones, students at first were unaware of what was happening. But, Ms. Lee recalls "teachers starting to panic" as they saw the news. What had begun as a "really joyful and fun and free" gathering, quickly transformed into collective distress about threats to loved ones outside the school's walls.

In recent months, immigrant parents often have felt caught between a need to protect themselves and their families from deportation and a desire to support their children's education. Ms. Lee reports that many families were afraid to attend graduation ceremonies. Some families have hunkered down in their homes, "figur[ing] out all the other ways of getting groceries." Financial strain has grown as workplaces increasingly are targeted by ICE, forcing some parents to miss paychecks. Even still, parents feel compelled to make a difference for their kids. Ms. Lee recounts a parent who attended a meeting on a day when ICE agents had been reported just two blocks from the school. The mom told her, "I'm afraid of ICE, and I'm afraid of being deported, but this meeting is about safety, and I have to be here for my kids." Ms. Lee explains: "Parents are making these super intense decisions, and it's showing how amazing they are."

The current situation also is extraordinarily stressful for school staff. One teacher who grew up in the neighborhood still gets a ride home from her dad. Because he is undocumented, she worries about suspicious cars in the school's parking lot. Other teachers have joined local immigrant rights networks. Prior to school each day, they walk the blocks in the neighborhood to create a safe pathway to campus. "They feel a very clear responsibility to protect the students." Ms. Lee points out that this "double sense of duty … is pretty exhausting."

And Ms. Lee is constantly thinking about what she needs to do to safeguard her students and her school. In previous years, like many high school principals, she has lived with the daily anxiety that an active shooter situation would occur. "These horrible scenarios in your mind," she points out, "cause stress … even though they're not happening." Now, she finds herself thinking through another sort of crisis: "What are we going to do if ICE shows up?" This question is always running in the background of Ms. Lee's mind. While it is, she acknowledges, "a little stressful to consider, we always want to make sure we're not caught off guard." With a mix of determination and fatigue, she concludes: "It's a lot."

## Conclusion:

# Intensive immigration enforcement challenges principals and the purpose of public education

Throughout this report, we have highlighted the early effects of immigration enforcement on U.S. public schools. High school principals across the United States describe heightened distress amongst students from immigrant families. A majority of principals note that immigrant families have moved out of their communities and almost ⅔ report declines in the attendance of students from immigrant families. In combination with anti-immigrant rhetoric from national politicians, these dynamics are affecting daily life in U.S. public schools. California principal Deborah Stewart told us: "I probably dealt with seven or eight staff breaking down in tears about a student or … a worry or fear." She added: "It just doesn't feel very American."

The high school principals in our study feel a professional and moral obligation to meet the needs of the moment. They recognize a constitutional responsibility to ensure that all their students—native born or immigrant—are provided with a quality education. They embrace the need to foster safe and caring school environments. And, generally, they are committed to supporting all students to learn and develop the capacities and commitments to contribute to their communities and the public good.

And yet, many principals expressed concern that their ability to advance the essential work of public education is being undercut by political forces beyond their control. Idaho principal Constance Smith worries daily about the possibility of ICE agents showing up with a judicial warrant to detain students at her school. "As the building leader," she told us, "I feel like I'm responsible for their safety—I hate that, because I don't feel I'm able to protect them." In a conservative California district, principal Patricia Long despairs that her superintendent rejected "as political" a request to send out a message to the community expressing the district's care and support for immigrant families. "Instead of it being about loving kids," she laments, "everything's politicized."

In another California community, principal Erica Park is empowered by district leaders to speak out on behalf of immigrant families. Her forceful statements have eased concerns somewhat. But, amidst the threat of imminent raids, such messages only go so far. "No matter how many times we tell them we will support you, we will protect you," the broader sense of uncertainty and vulnerability prevails. She concludes: "The fear is everywhere."

## Notes

1. "Stacy Costa" is a pseudonym. We use pseudonyms for all principals named in this report.

2. Anna Flagg, "How We Reported on Rhetoric About Immigrants in the 2024 Election," *The Marshall Project*, November 20, 2024, https://www.themarshallproject.org/2024/11/20/how-we-reported-on-rhetoric-about-immigrants-in-the-2024-election; Myah Ward, "We watched 20 Trump rallies. His racist, anti-immigrant messaging is getting darker," *Politico*, October 12, 2024, https://www.politico.com/news/2024/10/12/trump-racist-rhetoric-immigrants-00183537; Jazmine Ulloa, "Immigrant Rights Groups Condemn Violent Rhetoric Against Officers, and Immigrants," *New York Times*, September 24, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/24/us/ice-dallas-shooting-reaction-response.html

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6. Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, "A New Era of Immigration Enforcement Unfolds in the U.S. Interior and at the Border under Trump 2.0," *Migration Policy Institute*, October 2025, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/new-era-enforcement-trump-2

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## About the Authors

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**Deborah La Torre** is an associate research scientist in the UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, specializing in research methodology. Her work focuses on how to improve teaching and learning within STEM and other hard to staff subject areas. Deborah taught at both the elementary and higher education levels, an experience that continues to inform her research practice.

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