



IMMIGRANT FAMILY EMPOWERMENT: YOUR ADVOCACY GUIDE

A Resource Guide for Immigrant and
Multilingual Families in NYC Public Schools



June 2024

Immigrant Family Empowerment



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Introduction

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as well...

you have to understand,
that no one puts their children in a boat
unless the water is safer than the land

Overview and purpose of this resource guide

This excerpt from the poem, “Home” by Warsan Shire evokes the experience of leaving home for many immigrant families which calls on great courage to find safety, opportunity, and progress.

Immigrant families navigate unfamiliar environments, often facing discrimination, systemic barriers, and other challenges, all while striving to create a sense of home and future for their children. Through their actions and sacrifices, immigrant families play a vital role in shaping the identity and experiences of their children, highlighting their power and agency within the broader narrative of migration and belonging.

In this guide, we seek to honor the sacrifices made by immigrant families and acknowledge their inherent power to build home for themselves and their children. We honor their personal, cultural and linguistic diversity as the necessary assets and tools for families to be agents of change, leadership, and advocacy in their children’s academic lives regardless of immigration status. We recognize that family engagement supports the overall academic success and sense of belonging for students.

We invite all family members in New York City Public Schools to use this guide to learn about what it means to place yourself as an active member and leader of your child’s academic journey. In this guide you will access knowledge about your rights as immigrant families, you will learn about the different ways to get involved in your child’s school, and you will access ideas on how to lead for the purpose of change in your school community. Rooted in the ideas of Paulo Freire’s, this guide aims to affirm all members of a school community as active participants in their own learning and capable of developing the skills to analyze and transform their social realities.

Acknowledgements



NYC Public Schools’ Division of Multilingual Learners

The Division of Multilingual Learners aims to create equitable access to rigorous instruction and high expectations in a welcoming environment that affirms the racial, cultural, and linguistic identities of multilingual and immigrant students. We strive to ensure students can experience schools with a sense of purpose and belonging and graduate prepared for success in college, career, and life.

Dr. Mirza Sánchez-Media

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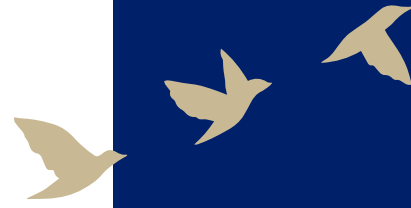
UndocuTeacher

UndocuTeacher offers instructional tools, consulting services, and professional development designed to enhance the learning experiences of immigrant, undocumented, and multilingual students. Their services facilitate a culturally relevant approach to teaching, focusing on the socio-emotional development of immigrant students centered on their lived experiences as strengths and assets to learning. The Division of Multilingual Learners would like to thank UndocuTeacher for the thought-partnership and contributions in creating this guide.

Emilia Fiallo

Founder of UndocuTeacher
Former NYC Public Schools Teacher
Formerly undocumented

Understanding Power and Agency



Power

Power is the capacity or ability of individuals, groups, or institutions to influence and to impact. Various forms of power can include economic, social, cultural, and political power, and operates through formal structures (like schools) and informal networks (like social relationships and cultural practices).



How is power exemplified by immigrant families?

Regardless of your immigration journey, you have the inherent strength and capacity to navigate, adapt to, and influence any new environments. Your power comes from:

- Your courage and your ability to move forward every day despite challenges.
- Your cultural assets, community ties, and the ability to create and use social networks.
- Your ability to create your own path, access resources, and contribute to the social, economic, and cultural fabric of communities you become a part of through your unique experiences and perspectives.

Agency

Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own free choices. It is the ability to exert power and influence over one's own life and decisions, even in situations where systemic barriers and obstacles can make this a challenging act.

How is agency practiced by immigrant families?

Immigrant families make their own decisions and take actions that best suit their needs and aspirations, even when facing challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, and legal limitations. For immigrant families, agency involves:

- Autonomy: The ability to make choices and decisions for your family.
- Empowerment: Making use of the resources, knowledge, and capability to take action.
- Responsibility: Being accountable for the outcomes of one's actions and decisions.
- Resistance: Challenging and changing power structures that do not benefit your family.



Now What: How do I make use of my power and agency to become an advocate?



Steps towards advocacy for immigrant families:
Step 1: Build Your Knowledge and Awareness
Step 2: Practice Agency Through Engagement
Step 3: Access Resources for Empowerment

STEP 1: BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS

AS IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN NYC PUBLIC SCHOOLS

1 ACCESS

NYC Public Schools does not ask about or track the immigration status of students or family members. US citizenship is not a requirement to enroll in any NYC public school.



You Should Know About Plyler v. Doe, 1982

Plyler v. Doe is a Supreme Court decision that ensures all children, **regardless of their immigration status, have the right to a free K-12 public education**. This ruling prohibits public schools from denying enrollment to undocumented immigrant children, affirming their right to an education.

2 CONFIDENTIALITY

Schools cannot share your personal information without your consent unless mandated by a signed court order.

FERPA

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

You Should Know About FERPA!

Under FERPA, student and family information is legally kept private. Schools cannot share your personal information with other agencies including ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) without your consent, unless mandated by a signed court order.

This means that all the information you share with your school remains confidential, including:

- enrollment documents.
- college application information for your child like names, addresses, and more.
- emergency contact information including addresses and names.

STEP 1: BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS

AS IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN THE NYC PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SAFE SCHOOLS

Non-local law enforcement, including Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), are not allowed in schools except when legally required and after consulting with NYC Public Schools' lawyers.

BASED ON THE "SENSITIVE LOCATIONS" POLICY, BY THE DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY (DHS), SCHOOLS ARE AREAS WHERE IMMIGRATION ENFORCEMENT ACTIONS ARE NOT TO TAKE PLACE.

Locations recognized as "schools"

- Primary and secondary schools
- Colleges and universities
- Daycare centers
- Head Start programs
- Other educational institutions



Other sensitive locations included in this memo are:



Medical Treatment and Healthcare Facilities

- Hospitals, doctor's offices, urgent care facilities.



Places of Worship

- Churches, synagogues, mosques, temples).



Religious or Civil Ceremonies and Observances:

- Funerals, weddings, other public religious ceremonies.



Public Demonstrations:

- Marches, rallies, parades, demonstrations

REMEMBER:
You CAN visit your child's school regardless of immigration status!



- Schools are safe places for immigrant families.
- Schools DO NOT ask you to provide a state or U.S. issued ID to enter.
- You can bring your passport, Consular ID card, NYC ID (IDNYC), Employee ID with photo, Public Assistance card with photo or Student ID to sign in as a guest or visitor.

STEP 1: BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS AS MULTILINGUAL FAMILIES

MULTILINGUAL APPROACH

The NYC Public Schools value the cultural and linguistic diversity of multilingual families and students as assets to all school communities.



NYC SCHOOLS ARE MULTILINGUAL

During the 2022-2023 school year, **ELLs in NYC public schools communicated in 150 languages other than English.** Over 66% of ELLs are Spanish speakers, followed by students who speak Chinese, Arabic, Russian, Bengali, Urdu, Haitian Creole, Uzbek, French, and Ukrainian.

Source: 2022-23 ELL Demographics At A Glance report by DML

TERMS TO KNOW AS AN IMMIGRANT AND MULTILINGUAL PARENT:



- **Multilingual** - refers to the use of multiple languages by an individual or within a community.
- **English as a New Language (ENL)** is a program designed to support ELLs in developing their English language proficiency.
- **English Language Learner (ELL)** is a student whose primary language is not English and who needs additional support to achieve proficiency in English.
- **Bilingual Education Programs-** These programs, including Dual Language and Transitional Bilingual Education, help students become proficient in both English and their home language. Dual Language programs teach in both languages, while Transitional Bilingual Education aims for a gradual transition to English.

STEP 1: BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS AS MULTILINGUAL FAMILIES

2 LANGUAGE ACCESS

Schools must ensure that families receive important school communications in their preferred language, including translation of documents and interpretation services.

Know Your Language Access Rights

Communication in Preferred Language:

- Families have the right to receive information about their child's education in their preferred language, including translation of important documents and access to interpretation services.

Progress Reports:

- Parents have the right to receive regular reports on their child's progress in learning English and other academic subjects, communicated in their preferred language.

3 LANGUAGE OPTIONS

Schools must provide English as a New Language (ENL) services such as Bilingual Education Programs for all students who are developing their English language proficiency.

Know Your Language Option Rights

Language Support Services:

- Parents have the right to have their child assessed for English proficiency and to receive appropriate language support services, such as English as a New Language (ENL) and Bilingual Education programs.

Program Choice:

- Parents have the right to choose from available language support programs (e.g., Dual Language, Transitional Bilingual Education, ENL) for their child and receive detailed information about each program option.

Participation in School Activities:

- Parents have the right to participate in all school activities and meetings related to their child's education, with language assistance provided.

STEP 1: BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS

COLLEGE AND CAREER ACCESS FOR YOUR CHILDREN

COLLEGE ACCESS

Undocumented students can go to college regardless of status.

MIXED STATUS FAMILIES

U.S born students can go to college even if their parents are undocumented.

FINANCIAL AID

There is financial supports out there for undocumented students to finance their education!

Facts for Undocumented Students:

- **Undocumented students are not eligible for federal financial aid**, including grants, loans, and work-study programs.
- **Undocumented students in New York have access to state financial aid through the New York State DREAM Act**, which allows them to apply for various types of assistance, including:
 - Tuition Assistance Program (TAP)
 - Excelsior Scholarship: Covers tuition for eligible students attending SUNY or CUNY schools.
 - Enhanced Tuition Awards (ETA): Offers tuition assistance to students attending private colleges in New York.
 - To apply, students must complete the NYS DREAM Act application online and meet the requirements.
- **Undocumented students in New York may qualify for in-state tuition rates at public colleges and universities if they meet certain criteria**, including:
 - They must have attended a New York high school for at least two years and graduated from a New York high school, or they must have obtained a New York State GED.
 - They must enroll in a New York state college or university within five years of receiving their high school diploma or GED.
 - They must file an affidavit with the college or university stating that they will apply for legal residency as soon as they are eligible to do so.

For U.S-born children in mixed-status families:

- **Eligibility for Federal Aid:** If the student is a U.S. citizen or eligible noncitizen, they can complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) which is a form used by students to apply for federal financial aid regardless of their parents' immigration status.
- Families are encouraged to visit <https://studentaid.gov/h/apply-for-aid/fafsa> for updates, and check with your child's college counselor for support.

STEP 1: BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS

FAMILIES IN TEMPORARY HOUSING

Students in Temporary Housing Include Youth and Families Who Are:

- Doubled up (with friends or relatives because they cannot find or afford housing)
- Living in a shelter or transitional shelter,
- Living in a hotel/motel,
- Living in a car, bus or train,
- Living in a park or public place, or
- Living in an abandoned building
- Unaccompanied youth not in the custody of a parent or guardian are also considered, including those who:
 - have run away from home,
 - have been kicked out of their homes
 - have been abandoned by parents.

Source: NYC Public Schools Students In Temporary Housing

MCKINNEY-VENTO ACT

Students in temporary housing have rights, including the right to a free education, a right to free transportation and more.

Students and families who fall under the McKinney-Vento Act due to their current temporary housing circumstances are entitled to the following support:



- A free public education.
- Immediate enrollment in the zoned school, provided there are available seats.
- Attend school no matter how long they have lived at their current location.
- Stay in their school of origin (school attended before becoming unhoused or the last school attended) or choose to attend their new zoned school.
- Transportation services to and from school.
- To not be denied immediate school enrollment just because of their situation or because they lack enrollment documentation.
- To not be separated from the regular school program because they are homeless.
- To receive free school meals.

Source: NYC Public Schools Students In Temporary Housing

STEP 1: BUILD YOUR KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS

FAMILIES IN TEMPORARY HOUSING

2



UNDOCUMENTED FAMILIES

Undocumented immigrant families can access many city services, regardless of their status.

Regardless of Immigration Status Families Can Access:

- Low-cost or free health insurance
- Free school breakfast or lunch
- A free city ID card through IDNYC
- Food from pantries and community kitchens
- NYC Summer enrichment programs

Source: Students in Temporary Housing Resource Guide

3



FAMILY WELCOME CENTERS

Welcome centers, school social workers, and online resources provide you with local support to access support.

KEY RESOURCES:

- **Welcome Centers for enrollment:**
 - <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/enrollment/enrollment-help/family-welcome-centers>
- Reach out to your **school's social worker** for support in accessing key resources around housing, public benefits, transportation, and food accessibility.
- **Students In Temporary Housing Main Guide:**
 - sth.cityofnewyork.us/

STEP 2: PRACTICE AGENCY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

- STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH EDUCATORS
- OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENT AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOL DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES
- PROMOTING CULTURAL COMPETENCY AND INCLUSION IN YOUR SCHOOL

Families, educators, and community members are all essential partners in fostering student success.

At the heart of this teamwork is the student who benefits from a family who is informed, engaged, and present.

School engagement looks different for every family. Use your agency to determine the best ways to get involved that work for you and your child.



Practice #1

Remain responsive and in communication with your child's school and educators.

Practice #2

Remain present and visible in your child's school.



Practice #3

Provide feedback and share insight with your child's school.

Remember that your immigration status and language abilities are not barriers to staying engaged in your child's school!

STEP 2: PRACTICE AGENCY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

Update Your Contact Information

Ensure your emergency contact information is current by updating your details with your child's school office.

Speak to Your Parent Coordinator

Connect with the parent coordinator at your child's school for guidance and information about programs, resources, training, events, and involvement opportunities.

New York City Schools Account

The NYC Schools Account (NYCSA) app helps you track your child's education by providing access to their grades, attendance, schedule, and more.

Practice #1: Remain responsive and in communication with your child's school and educators



Communicate with Teachers

Teachers and school staff will reach out via phone calls, texts, and/or emails. Ensure communication is in your language. Reach out to the school if you need translation support.

RESOURCES:

- If you need to find the contact information for specific school staff, including the parent coordinator of your child's school, go to <https://schoolsearch.schools.nyc/> and enter the name of the school.
- Make sure you have a New York City Schools Account. Go to <https://www.schoolsaccount.nyc/> to open an account in your language.

TIP:

Check on a friend! If you have established all means of communication with your school, tell a friend to follow the same steps to stay informed as a community!

STEP 2: PRACTICE AGENCY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

Participate in School Meetings and Events

Engage in school events, such as field trips, classroom assistance, or school fairs, to show your involvement, your voice and support.

Get Involved in Parent-led Groups & Committees

Become an active member of the Parent-Teacher Association or other school committees to contribute to school decisions and activities, regardless of language abilities.

Attend Parent Teacher Conferences

Regularly participate in meetings with your child's teachers to stay informed about their progress and address any concerns. The school must provide translation and interpretation services.

Practice #2: Remain present and visible in your child's school.



Visit the School Regularly

Make periodic visits to the school to interact with staff and teachers, showing your ongoing interest in your child's education and well-being.

RESOURCES:

- Know important NYC Public School dates on the school calendar: <https://www.schools.nyc.gov/calendar>

Tip: Have you asked these questions to your child's teachers?

- What is my child expected to learn at this grade level, and what major projects will they be doing?
- How will I know if my child is meeting language and grade-level expectations throughout the year?
- What does my child do well and where do they struggle?
- What resources are available if my child needs extra help or wants to learn more outside the classroom?
- How can I contact you if I have any questions?

STEP 2: PRACTICE AGENCY THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

Your Perspective Matters

NYC Public Schools thrive when immigrant parents are involved and share a unique perspective that informs their programming and support systems for immigrant students.

Communicate About Your Child's Needs

Inform teachers and school staff about any specific needs, learning styles, or cultural factors that can help them better support your child.

Participate in School Surveys and Feedback Forms:

Take part in any surveys or feedback opportunities provided by the school to express your opinions and suggestions.

Practice #3: Provide feedback and share insight with your child's school



Build Your Own Space

If your school is not utilizing resources to support your language needs or to facilitate your involvement, create a support system of other parents and teachers ready to advocate for changes to ensure immigrant families' voices are heard and considered.

RESOURCES:

- Get involved where your perspective is needed:
 - To advocate for students and families, join a Parent Association:
<https://www.schools.nyc.gov/get-involved/families/parent-associations>
 - To promote inclusivity and diversity, join a School Wellness Council:
<https://www.schools.nyc.gov/get-involved/families/school-wellness-councils>

TIP:

If you notice something in your school that you wish to change, think about an ally or a staff member that can help. Share your concerns with them, follow up, and stay committed to solving the issue together as a school team.

STEP 3: ACCESS RESOURCES FOR EMPOWERMENT

LANGUAGE ACCESS SERVICES

NYC Public Schools Speak Your Language! Families may request language services. Learn more: schools.nyc.gov/school-life/school-environment/hello



PARENT UNIVERSITY BY NYC PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Parent University seeks to educate and empower families as partners, advocates, and lifelong educators in their student's education through free courses, resources, events, and activities. Register: parentu.schools.nyc



COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Community Organizations that Help Multilingual Learners and Immigrant Students: bit.ly/DMLCBO



LEARN ENGLISH FOR FREE

We Speak NYC (WSNYC) is the city's free adult English language learning and conversation program developed and administered by the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (MOIA). Visit: nyc.gov/wespeaknyc



GET AN ID

IDNYC card is an accessible and secure document that enables you to access City services and enter City buildings that provide services to the public. Visit: nyc.gov/site/idnyc/index.page

Undocumented immigrants who are residents of New York State can apply for a standard driver's license or non-driver ID card. Visit: dmv.ny.gov/



IMMIGRATION LEGAL AID

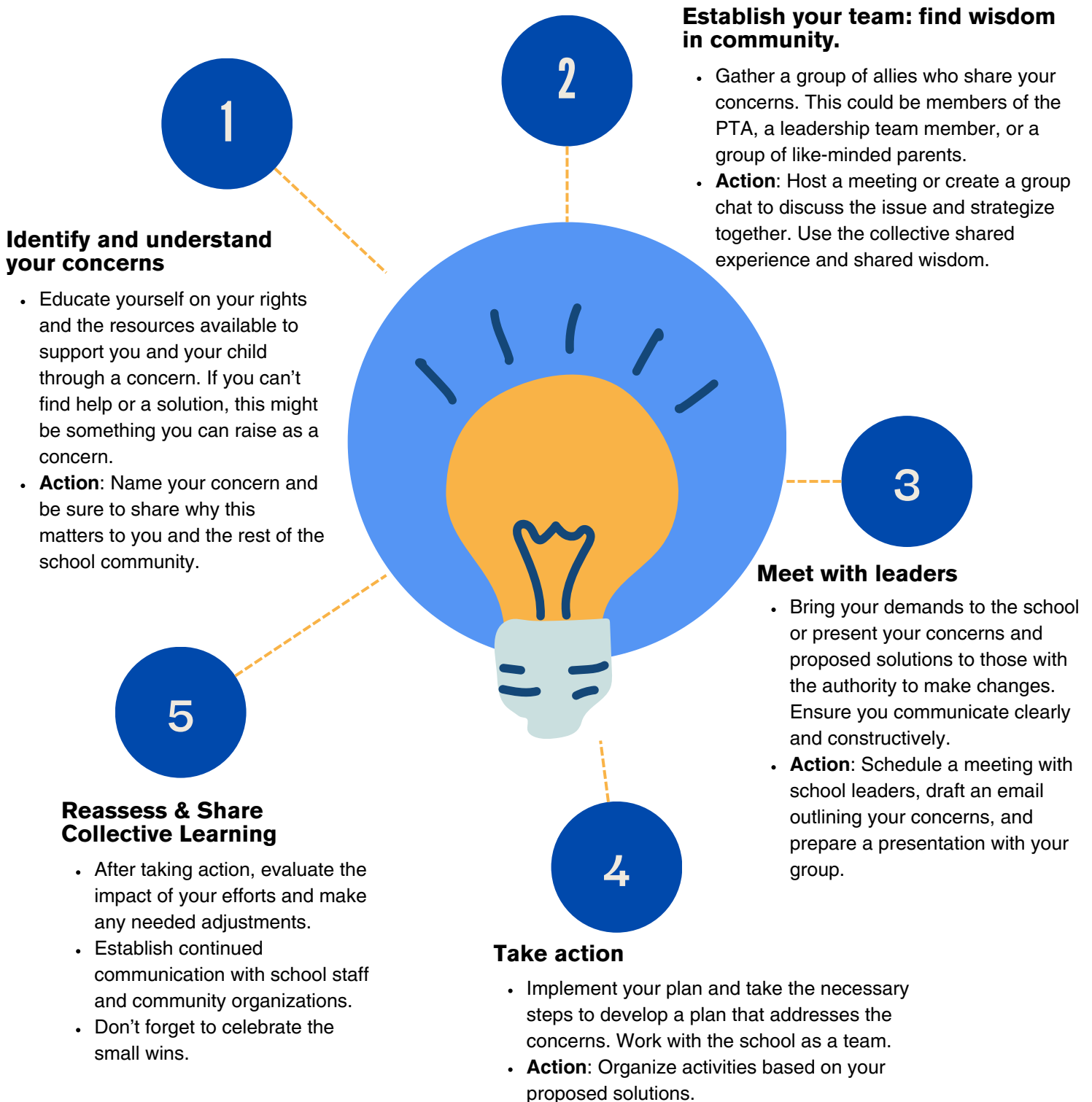
New York City offers free, safe immigration legal help through trusted community organizations at various sites including health facilities, schools, and libraries. Services are available in your language regardless of immigration status. Call the MOIA Immigration Legal Support Hotline at 800-354-0365, or 311 and say "ActionNYC," from 9AM to 6PM, Monday to Friday.



A VISUAL MODEL OF FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Immigrant and multilingual families have the power and agency to create positive change in their schools by leveraging their awareness of their rights and available resources. By understanding your rights and utilizing the resources at your disposal, families can confidently lead initiatives for change.

This ensures that when it's time to advocate for improvements in your child's school, you can do so with confidence and knowledge, regardless of language barriers or immigration status. Schools should be places where all families feel they belong and are empowered to make a difference.



WORKSHEET FOR FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SUCCESS

Organize yourself by completing this worksheet designed to support you in making use of your resources, knowledge, and tools necessary to feel confident about using your voice as part of a school community.

School's Name: _____

Important School Information to Know:

- ☐ Name of my school's parent coordinator: _____
- ☐ Contact information of parent coordinator: _____
- ☐ Name of ENL Coordinator or Teacher: _____
- ☐ Contact information of ENL Coordinator or teacher: _____
- ☐ Name and phone number of a school parent and friend: _____

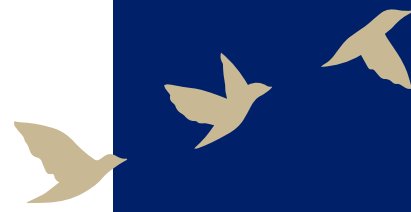
Checklist of Important Tasks for the School Year

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Update my contact information with the main office | ☐ Connect with at least one of my child's teachers |
| ☐ Create a NYC Schools Account | ☐ Attend a school event to support my child (performance, presentation, or game) |
| ☐ Receive communication from the school in my language (email, text, or phone calls) | ☐ Make a new friend with a parent of a similar background |
| ☐ Introduce myself to the parent coordinator | ☐ Attend Parent Teacher Conference in the spring |
| ☐ Attend at least one parent event to meet the teachers early in the school year | ☐ Share feedback to the school in a survey at least once a year |
| ☐ Attend Parent Teacher Conference in the fall | |
| ☐ Become part of a parent-led association or committee | |

Community Organizations:

- ☐ Immigration Services: _____
- ☐ Housing Support: _____
- ☐ Local Church: _____
- ☐ Mental Health Support: _____

Case Studies and Success Stories



THE FIALLO FAMILY

- We are an immigrant family from Ecuador
- We had 2 children in NYC Public Schools
- We speak Spanish

Challenges we have faced:

We did not know we could have access to our children's school and we often skipped out on parent-teacher conferences. We felt disconnected from the school and when it was time for my daughters to apply to college, we could not help them because we didn't know who to speak to in the school.

Solutions to our challenges

Our child's college counselor discovered our insecurities about college when my daughter sought help. We met the counselor when my daughter was awarded a scholarship to start her college career. We didn't know undocumented students had options.

Our Strengths

- Our faith
- Our love for our children
- Our marriage
- Love to cook!

Our Hobbies

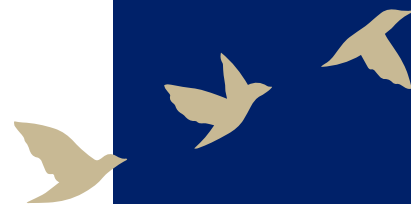
- Picnic Friday's at the park
- Soccer games on the weekend

Lesson Learned



The Fiallo family did not have to share their immigration status to receive support from their college counselor. Every school must ensure that all parents are informed about available resources in their language. The Fiallo family set a precedent, making the college counselor aware of the presence of more undocumented and mixed-status families in similar situations. The Fiallo family should celebrate their advocacy, which will ensure that these resources are shared with all families in the future.

Case Studies and Success Stories



THE BHUIYAN-MORALES FAMILY

- We are a mixed status family of South East Asian and Mexican descent
- We have 2 children in NYC Public Schools
- We speak Bengali, Spanish and English

Challenges we have faced:

With our oldest child, the school struggled to communicate proactively with us. My biggest concern were the cultural misunderstandings my child experienced in that school. We set up a meeting with the leadership, guidance counselor, teacher, literacy coach, and art therapist. I brought a list of concerns and my own suggestions, advocating for what I knew would work best for my child. With the guidance counselor's help, we developed a plan. It worked, and we saw a significant improvement in my son's behavior, but my trust in the school was broken.

Our Strengths

- We are transparent and honest in our communication with each other. We make decisions together as a family.

Our Hobbies

- traveling
- trying different foods
- board games and puzzles
- watching movies together
- dancing away our stress to music

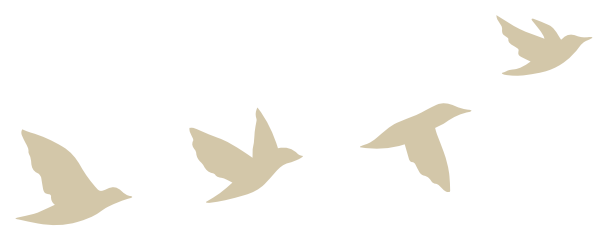
Solutions to our challenges

The school counselor helped us understand our options. As a family, we decided to research schools more thoroughly and accept that sometimes a school may not be the right fit. We realized it's important to know when it's time to transfer to a school where our child will be understood. Now, I know I have the power to speak up. I've learned to document all conversations and interactions, and to come prepared to meetings with evidence and solutions.

Lesson Learned



The Bhuiyan-Morales family had to make tough decisions. It's crucial for parents to communicate their concerns with the school, ensuring accountability on both sides. If you need language support for meetings, the school is required to provide it. As an immigrant family, you have the right to discuss your child's academic progress with the school without fear of revenge. It is also important to ask for help from experts if you need more information. The Bhuiyan-Morales family found support by consulting with a child psychologist and a mental health therapist. They are the best advocates for their children.



A letter to all immigrant families

There is no guide that can teach a parent to be strong and resilient while facing the significant life changes brought upon a family after migration. There is no step-by-step guide to navigate a new country away from the familiarity of home while also raising children, maintaining jobs, and learning a new culture and language. Many of these new experiences will be challenges but like many times before, you will overcome these challenges to better days. Being an immigrant parent in New York City is not easy, but it doesn't have to be lonely. Part of the inherent power all immigrants have is the ability to build community and networks of support to ensure everyone is fully taken care of.

Community is the key to overcoming challenges. We are our power in community.

As challenges arise every day, remember that you have the power and the agency to call on yourself, your community, and your resources to create the life you have dreamed of here in your new home for your family. NYC Public Schools are committed to being safe spaces for immigrant families, places where immigrant families are seen as valuable members full of diverse languages, perspectives, cultures, and more. Now is the time, that you, as a parent or guardian, ensures that your child's school is working towards this collective vision.

