

Opinion | *From bus stops to classrooms, fear is dismantling our children's education*

This is happening across Minnesota. We call on immigration authorities and elected leaders to immediately restore respect for “sensitive locations.”

By multiple authors

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Federal agents sit in their vehicles on a residential street as bystanders record them a few blocks away from North Minneapolis High School in Minneapolis on Jan. 29. (Alex Kormann/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Star Tribune opinion editor's note: *The following commentary was submitted by Sondra Samuels on behalf of the Education Partnership Coalition, a statewide group of nine organizations that focuses on children in Minnesota receiving a strong education regardless of race, income and/or ethnicity. The coalition was founded in 2015.*

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For the first time since 2020, Minnesota schools are closing buildings, shifting to remote learning and battling skyrocketing absenteeism. But this time, the cause isn't a virus.

The empty desks in our classrooms are the direct result of "Operation Metro Surge" and the presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Border Patrol agents in and near our educational spaces. Just as our students were regaining their footing after the pandemic, a new, entirely human-made crisis is driving them out of school.

The Education Partnerships Coalition (EPC) serves nearly 310,000 children across nine communities, working with more than 600 partners statewide. We were founded as a relentlessly bipartisan organization to improve education outcomes for Minnesotans. While we understand the necessity of enforcement to detain those who violate the law, we are witnessing a disturbing trend where current operations harm children more than they apprehend real criminals.

Research confirms that toxic stress interrupts development and harms a child's health. Evidence shows that these adverse childhood experiences directly dismantle a student's ability to learn. Our coalition warns that this operation has crossed a line: It is disrupting the education system we have worked so hard to rebuild.

Historically, schools were designated "sensitive locations." Under the Bush, Obama, first Trump and Biden administrations, ICE agents required supervisory approval to conduct operations in and near schools to avoid traumatizing children. Today, that norm has vanished. A January 2025 directive from the Department of Homeland Security allows ICE agents in and near schools, effectively ending their "sensitive" designation.

The presence of federal officers has had a chilling effect. On Jan. 7, Border Patrol agents entered Roosevelt High School's property during dismissal, releasing chemical agents and handcuffing staff as students watched. Minneapolis Public Schools subsequently canceled classes districtwide.

This is not an isolated incident. The impact on students – especially students of color – across Minnesota is irrefutable:

- In Minneapolis, a 2-year-old was detained and sent to Texas with her father, reunited with her mother only after a court order.
- In Columbia Heights, four students under 18 have been detained, including a 5-year-old boy who was sent to a Texas facility with his father in mid-January before being returned to Minnesota over the weekend.
- In Willmar, more than 500 kids were absent from school following increased ICE presence.
- In Austin, attendance plummeted at the annual Preschool Showcase, a critical event to connect parents to early learning programs and developmental screenings.

- In Robbinsdale, a parent was detained at a bus stop while sending their child to school.
- In Red Wing and Goodhue County, teenagers carry passports and manage family affairs because their parents fear being detained for their accent or skin color. Students of color increasingly ask to leave class due to an inability to concentrate.
- In St. Paul, ICE pulled over two vans transporting students to school.
- In north Minneapolis, a family of six was flash-banged in their car on the way home from a basketball game, hospitalizing them. Related to the federal activity, a kindergartner arrived at school saying the “frozen people” were scaring her.

In response, districts including Minneapolis, St. Paul, Fridley, Robbinsdale, Bloomington and Columbia Heights started offering virtual options. Yet administrators report parents are refusing internet hotspots for virtual learning, fearing that providing state IDs will put them on a target list.

Bus stops and school entrances – once places of stability – are now places of fear and uncertainty. Students are missing school activities, sports, internships and tutoring. The recent fatal shootings by federal agents of Renee Good and Alex Pretti only add to students’ anxiety.

The consequences of this instability are predictable: Children lose access to support, and schools face higher intervention costs later. The achievement gap widens. Educators spend less time teaching and more time managing crises. Much of EPC’s work is dedicated to interrupting childhood trauma that stunts brain development and hinders emotional regulation, yet current policies are actively undoing this critical progress.

We, as a coalition, call on immigration authorities and elected leaders to immediately restore respect for “sensitive locations” and reinstitute protocols to protect our children from trauma. We urge our communities to stand with parents and administrators to protect the sanctity of the classroom. Our children are watching how we respond. We have a bipartisan duty to ensure their safety and development – our nation’s future depends on it.