

## Welcoming Schools Project

Volunteers interested in protecting the rights of immigrant, refugee and Muslim students and their families have an opportunity to help ensure that schools remain welcoming places by encouraging their local school district to issue Plyler statements of support.

The United States Supreme Court held in *Plyler v. Doe* that states “may not willfully deny a discrete group of innocent children the free public education that it offers to other children residing within its borders.<sup>1</sup>” In response to threats to freedoms posed by recently announced Executive Orders, some school districts, like Ann Arbor Public Schools, have taken the initiative to announce publicly their support of the *Plyler* ruling and affirmed their commitment to protecting undocumented students from harassment and discrimination. The ACLU of Michigan would like to see more districts take similar measures and is encouraging volunteers to join the effort.

We have developed some tools that ACLU volunteers interested in this project can use to encourage school boards across the state to adopt Plyler statements:

- Outreach Overview
- Talking Points
- Sample Letter to Parents from School Districts
- Sample Statement to Communities from School Districts

The project toolkit is available online at [www.aclumich.org](http://www.aclumich.org). Please contact ACLU of Michigan Field Director, Rodd Monts, at [rmonts@aclumich.org](mailto:rmonts@aclumich.org), or 313-578-6830, for additional information.

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<sup>1</sup> 457 U.S. 202 (1982)

### *Outreach to School Districts*

To help you get a “Welcoming Statement” adopted by your local school district we have included templates that you can share with school board members and superintendents. We encourage you to call or write to your board members and request time to talk about your interest in having a Plyler statement adopted. You should also inform them that you have a template from which they can work. Most school districts post information on board members and board meetings online, and if they do not you can always call the district office. You might also make the request during the public comment portion of a school board meeting.

To effectively move the project forward you will need to work with both the school board and superintendent. Your school board is responsible for adopting education policy in the district and hires the superintendent. The superintendent acts as the CEO of the district and has executive oversight and administrative responsibility for operations. Because the school board enacts policy changes in the district the superintendent should be copied on your correspondence to the board. We include talking points you can use to help make your case in the section below.

### *Welcoming Schools Talking Points*

Here are a few key messages you should highlight in your discussions with school officials:

- Every child in our community has the right, regardless of immigration status, to access a free and appropriate public education. Our district should publicly declare that we have Welcoming Schools in our community.
- The United States Supreme Court held in *Plyer v. Doe* (1982) that no public school district has a basis to deny children access to education based on their immigration status, citing the harm caused to the child and society itself, and the equal protection rights of the Fourteenth Amendment.
- Because some parents and students may be fearful or confused about the degree to which our schools are ensuring physical safety and the emotional wellbeing of all children our district should take steps to communicate that we are welcoming of all student and attentive to their concerns.
- The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) policy characterizes public schools as "sensitive locations," places where, unless there are exigent circumstances, enforcement actions should not occur.
- Immigration enforcement activities around schools create hardships and barriers to health and educational attainment, and a pervasive climate of fear, conflict and stress that affects all students in our District, regardless of their background or documented status.



*Sample Letter to Parents from Schools*

Date

Name

Address

City

Dear Parents,

We at [School/District] pride ourselves on the diversity of our community. It is our belief that the rich cultures and languages of our students, faculty, and families are not only an asset, but an integral part of our shared identity and experience. As the [School/District] community, we share in the commitment to engage in respectful, productive, and nonpartisan civic engagement and communication in a safe and inclusive space.

[School/District] is committed to ensuring that our students and staff feel safe, welcomed and respected at school. This means we will continue to provide an exceptional education to all our students regardless of their race, language, ethnicity, citizenship, or immigration status. To advance these efforts, we have issued a public policy statement reflecting our school's commitment to providing free and public education to all the students in our community. This is not only our constitutional duty, it is our privilege.

All [School/District] students are brimming with promise and we recognize that they need our protection, advocacy, and reassurance now more than ever.

Sincerely,

[Administrator's Name]

[Title]

[School/District]

## *Sample Statement from School District to the Community*

[*School District/Board*]

### **We Are Welcoming Schools: Affirming Our Support for All Students**

Public education is a fundamental right and is a critical factor in the ability of all citizens to exercise their rights under the Constitution. Michigan’s Constitution provides that “[t]he legislature shall maintain and support a system of free public elementary and secondary schools as defined by law. Every school district shall provide for the education of its pupils without discrimination as to religion, creed, race, color or national origin.” (Const. 1963, Art. VIII, § 2, Eff. Jan. 1, 1964). Similarly, the United States Supreme Court held in *Plyler v. Doe* that the State may not willfully deny a discrete group of innocent children the free public education that it offers to other children residing within its borders.<sup>2</sup>

Our school is charged with the duty of providing a safe and inclusive educational environment for all our students. The [*School District/Board*] recognizes that every child is a valuable and contributing member of their educational community. To this end, no student shall have their education barred or impinged in any way because of their country of citizenship or immigration status. The best education occurs in a school comprised of students, teachers, and families drawn from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, cultures, races, religions, and sexual orientation.

[Name]

[Title]

[School District/Board]

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<sup>2</sup> 457 U.S. 202 (1982)