

No Longer Invisible: We Can do a lot More to Support our Undocumented Students

by Dr. Marta Guevara, Director of Student and Family Engagement for the Amherst-Pelham Regional School District

“I was abused and disrespected while on my journey here. I endured unthinkable things while at the mercy of the men who promised a safe journey here. I was pregnant with my fourth child, while I carried my six year old on my back. I have been working 18 hour days on my knees, cleaning other people’s spaces, sacrificing my life and my time with my family so that my children could get the education I couldn’t--to give them the education no one could take away. Today, with one statement, a teacher invalidated my work, crushed my dreams and my son’s future.”

These are the words a mother of one of our students shared with me on Thursday, October 22, 2015. She went on to say that a HS teacher had told her son he could not go to a university because he is undocumented. My immediate reaction was that this must be a misunderstanding. Had her son heard wrong? Perhaps, he didn’t understand what the teacher had said to him. In my mind, there was no way anyone working in our district would ever say this to a student. While every institution’s policy differs, there is no federal or state law that prohibits undocumented students from attending college, nor is there a law that even requires students to prove citizenship. In fact, roughly over 10,000 undocumented students attend colleges and universities every year. I asked the mother to please share “exactly” what her son was told. Her response to me was, “What does it really matter, if that is what he understood?” I looked directly into her eyes, filled with her deep disappointment and sadness, as I searched for an explanation. I didn’t have one. Instead, I started to cry...

We have many undocumented students in our district. Their journeys to our schools vary greatly, but they share the dream of having better lives with the promise of an education. Some of our undocumented students come to us from places where violent gangs rule and people disappear without a trace. Many were left behind to live with relatives, while their parents earned enough cash to secure housing and find a safe community to “send for them”. This process often lasts several years. While time passes, these children are often neglected, go without proper nutrition, or access to health care and are unable to attend school (it costs money to attend). Before long, families become fragmented, children are adultified, guilt and resentment grows, while mental illness and anguish take over.

After saying every comforting thing I could think of to this mother, I said I would make sure we took care of her son's dreams and asked her to partner with us in the process. We made a date to meet with her and her son to de-construct, start anew, and plan next steps. As I reflected on her words and looked closely at her son's academic and social reality, I realized how much more would need to be done by others, the student, mom and, of course, me to ensure we created the proper conditions and support for her son to have the opportunity to access, participate and benefit from a college/university experience. After all, isn't that what we are here to offer all of our students?

While each student is unique and deserves individual attention in their educational journey to success, all undocumented students can benefit from the following:

1. Every student must be supported by every staff person they come in contact with. Staff must make every effort to establish a trusting, helping, working relationship with the students. Education is their key to freedom and breaking the cycle of poverty. Everyone has a role!
2. Trust is important and a key factor to building relationships and supporting students with undocumented status. Please do not ask students to self-identify. Choose, instead, to identify yourself as an ally/supporter.
3. Educate yourself about the resources available to undocumented students in our district and local communities. The ARPS Family Center is partnering with many agencies and programs to support these students as they continue their education post high school.
4. Be aware that most undocumented students who arrive to our community have done so with the help of someone who charged them and their families a lot of money to facilitate their journey crossing the border into the USA. Because of astronomical fees (up to \$15,000 per person) for this "service", students may have to work many hours to help pay their debt. Understand that many of these young people have to work for their survival and not working is not an option. This, of course, affects the amount of time they can devote to homework and special projects assigned to be completed during after school hours and participate in the activities most other high schoolers can.
5. Staff working directly with undocumented students should learn about local and federal policies and legislation affecting undocumented students. It is important that they understand the federal Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), DACA+, and other programs. It would be ideal for them to share the eligibility requirements

and application process with the students and/or refer them to the right person/agency to support them. The ARPS Family Center can help staff navigate this.

6. We must all help students understand that their current immigration status does not dictate what their future holds. Staff can help reassure them that their status is transitional and provide them the information they need to help them find pathways to support and success. Again, the ARPS Family Center can help you.
7. We can connect students to others in the school/community who can support them, making sure they know they are not alone and that others have been successful in pursuing their education and have prospered. The ARPS Family Center has information and stories to share and there are online resources they can access.
8. Make sure students are accessing reputable legal counsel. Unfortunately for many, not having accurate information has cost them a lot of money, wasted time and missed deadlines to access programs. The Center for New Americans offers support and referrals to local attorneys and programs.
9. It takes a village to raise a child and for most undocumented students, family is incredibly important and their most significant lifeline. Make sure you engage parents/guardians in all matters related to their education and well-being! The district provides interpreters to staff to access families who do not speak English.
10. Help create spaces for students to express themselves for who they are and not who we assume they are or expect them to be (i.e the stereotypes many still face). Help students wanting to share their stories do so in a safe, supportive environment.
11. Help raise awareness of what students are facing in school, their jobs and communities. Sharing information can lead to support and understanding. Students may want to form a club to help raise awareness of their stories and of those of other marginalized groups.
12. Be a good listener and keep an open mind. Accept that you do not necessarily understand what it means to be in these students' shoes. When you do not understand something they have shared, ask questions and work with the student. Remember that it is their life and their future that is at the center of your relationship.

Regardless of our experience with education and our own journey to our current job/assignment, we must be aware that being able to access the best education possible continues to be what most people around the globe want to pursue. Some

people perceive education as the great equalizer and a fundamental human right. For us in the Amherst-Pelham Regional Public Schools, education is what each and every one of our students are entitled to and what we are committed to facilitate for them. To the extent that all of our children are successful, we are successful as a district and community. Please know that you do not have to be alone in the process of supporting undocumented students. Feel free to send questions, thoughts and ideas to me or other ARPS Family Center staff.

I will close by sharing that we developed and are in the process of implementing a plan to support the young man whose story I shared at the beginning of this document. Staff from the ARPS Family Center and students from Mount Holyoke College have been meeting weekly with him and a group of other seniors with undocumented status in an attempt to provide the additional support they need to continue their education post high school. We have created the conditions to get to know them and their families, have had the honor of discussing their hopes and dreams, have helped them write essays for college applications and scholarships and have shared many other experiences. We are thankful to have been able to provide this individualized support and hope we can continue to do so with others.

The journey to success after high school began for the group of students we have been meeting with before they graduate in June. We thank all of their teachers and support staff who have contributed to their intellectual formation and have been looking after their physical and emotional safety with open hearts and minds. Thanks to all of these individuals, past and present, their future looks bright. They are aware of the choices they have available to them and have the helping hands they need to access them.

Marta

Helpful links:

<https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/get-started/for-undocumented-students/6-things-undocumented-students-need-to-know-about-college>

<http://nilc.org/>

http://professionals.collegeboard.com/profdownload/Repository-Resources-Undocumented-Students_2012.pdf

<http://www.teachingforchange.org/>

“Qué es Deportar? Teaching from Students’ Lives” by Sandra Osorio:

<https://www.rethinkingschools.org/articles/que-es-deportar-teaching-from-students-lives>

“Deporting Elena’s Father” by Melissa Bollow Tempel:

<https://www.rethinkingschools.org/articles/deporting-elenas-father>

“Who Can Stay Here? Documentation and Citizenship in Children’s Literature” by Grace Cornell Gonzales:

<https://www.rethinkingschools.org/articles/who-can-stay-here-documentation-and-citizenship-in-childrens-literature>

“Resources for Educators Supporting Dreamers” from the NEA:

<http://educationvotes.nea.org/neaedjustice/daca-resources/>

“U.S.-Mexico War: ‘We Take Nothing by Conquest, Thank God’” — reading by Howard Zinn; teaching activity by Bill Bigelow: <https://zinnedproject.org/materials/us-mexico-war-tea-party/>

A great list of books for teaching about immigration: <https://socialjusticebooks.org/booklists/immigration/>