

Youth Reporters Explore how DACA Debate Impacts California's Classrooms

News Reporter: The deadline to work out an immigration agreement is a little more than a week away. One of the key dividing lines: what to do about dreamers?

President Trump has said he plans to scrap the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Program, known as DACA, this spring unless a deal can be worked out.

In California and other states, teachers are on the frontlines and student anxiety is on the rise. We have a story from one of our Student Reporting Labs; it's reported by Fernando Cienfuegos. He's a Junior at Northview High School in Southern California. It's for our weekly segment: Making the Grade.

Paulina: When DACA got rescinded, I didn't really know where to go, it was, it was just a very numb feeling.

Fernando: Paulina is a recent Northview High School graduate and DACA recipient. She attends Mount San Antonio Community College. She says her high school teachers were critical in helping her get there. They outlined the steps she had to take as an undocumented student to get to graduation.

Paulina: If I didn't have Ms. Arellanes, I think I would not have been as inspired to continue my education. She would constantly give me paperwork and paperwork about DREAM, the DREAM Act, Dreamer's Financial Aid and that was very, very helpful because I didn't know where else to get that information. Just the immense amount of belief they had in me.

Teacher: Are you going to mention why you just began working this year?

Student: I started working this year because I barely got my DACA this year, so I'm just..

Teacher: But you're not going to put in the statement you want me to

Fernando: Yemina Arellanes teaches economics and provides college advising at Northview High School in Covina, California. She is one of a growing number of educators who independently sought training to support undocumented students.

Yemina: What motivated me to help undocumented students here at Northview was actually seeing the need. They really didn't know where to go.

Fernando: The Trump Administration's approach toward immigration actually scares some students.

Yemina: They've got a deep-seated struggle going on within them because as hard as they work and as much as they want to be educated, they have this fear inside that perhaps, within the next few years, no matter how educated that they are, they might be removed from this country. We're still trying to rebuild that trust and let them know that it's okay to come to us. That we're not gonna work against them and that we're not going to turn them in.

Fernando: An estimated 271,000 undocumented students are enrolled in the California K through 12 public school system. The largest number in the country, according to the Migration Policy Institute. In 1982 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that undocumented children have the right to a public education. Immigration advocates say that these students are a special needs group who would benefit from

schools providing counseling, legal advice, and federal immigration policy information to their student body.

Claremont Graduate University professor, William Perez, studies the social and psychological development of immigrant students. He says teachers need tools.

Dr. Perez: They're in desperate need of information about all the legislation. Teachers go online and they'll Google things, or you know, they'll find out about webinars or they'll find out about something that, you know, where they can go and sort of educate themselves. But, you know, it's being done in a very unsystematic way.

Fernando: Dr. Perez has launched the nation's first Allies of Dreamers Certificate program. The course trains educators how to support undocumented students transitioning to college and into the work force.

Dr. Perez: Teachers need to be well-equipped to be able to, you know, be responsive to their students.

Fernando: Despite supporting undocumented students, some conservatives, like Santa Ana School Board member, Cecilia Iglesias, believe academics should be the focus.

Cecilia: Santa Ana traditionally, historically, we have been underperforming. Which means failing our kids and, um, in the past 10 years we have been on program improvement. And those are the things we should be talking about. That's why we were elected. If we wanted to go into be affecting immigration policy, we should go into Congress. Politics should never come into it when it comes to education.

Fernando: Still, teachers like Yemina Arellanes say more must be done.

Yemina: I wish that the district would really work to educate our teachers, perhaps bring in some guest speakers, of students who have graduated, and have succeeded. Who were undocumented. So that everybody could see that our kids and other kids that are undocumented, they make it. They make it. If they have the support from the adults.

Fernando: For the PBS News Hour Student Reporting Labs, I'm Fernando Cienfuegos in Covina, California.

Two-thirds of DACA recipients are aged 25 or younger, and a majority are women.