

This testimony reflects my firsthand experience with the presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and its impact on my school community. I have also consulted with our licensed, school-based mental health clinicians to better understand the trauma responses we are seeing in children affected by Operation Metro Surge.

Columbia Heights Public Schools, located adjacent to Northeast Minneapolis, began the school year with approximately 3,400 students. We are currently down more than 100 students. In recent years, our district has experienced steady enrollment growth, making this decline a significant deviation that can be directly correlated to Operation Metro Surge. Our student population is over 50% Hispanic or Latino, 26% Black or of African descent, with the remainder identifying as White, Asian, or Native American. Columbia Heights is a designated City of Peace and was recognized as an All-America City in 2016 by the National Civic League.

To fully understand our experience during the surge, it is important to look back over the past year. When we learned that schools would no longer be considered protected spaces from ICE involvement, we began preparing. We trained staff and families through “Know Your Rights” presentations and equipped administrators with protocols for responding to ICE agents presenting a signed judicial warrant. However, those protocols were never put into practice, because that is not at all what occurred.

Beginning in October 2025, neighbors, community members, parents, and staff began standing on the corners near our schools to support and protect students. Schools serve as vital community hubs, and in response, we expanded food pantries and increased access to clothing, diapers, toiletries, and other essential resources. By December, awareness of ICE activity in our community had intensified.

On January 3, ICE agents first entered school property, without a warrant and without explanation. Students returned from winter break on January 5, and the very next day, January 6, our first student was detained with her mother on their way to school. By that afternoon, they were in a detention center in Texas. This was the first of seven students who would be detained.

It is important to emphasize that every family I worked with provided documentation of their legal immigration status. They did not enter this country unlawfully; they were permitted to be here. I personally reviewed their documentation, including alien registration numbers, scheduled check-in appointments, and extensive immigration records.

In the weeks that followed, it became a daily occurrence to see multiple ICE vehicles driving in front of and behind our schools, especially during arrival and dismissal times. As enforcement actions escalated, including armed operations in Minneapolis neighborhoods resulting in the shooting and killing of two people, we made decisions to protect students. On several occasions, principals were directed to hold indoor recess due to nearby ICE activity. We were concerned about the risk of stray bullets, as well as the psychological harm of children witnessing armed, masked agents apprehending the owner of the local taco shop, for example. .

Dismissal was delayed more than once due to heavy ICE presence near school grounds. Many families were too afraid to leave their homes. As a result, neighbors transported children to and from school, and teachers walked groups of students home, often as ICE vehicles circled. Our PTOs, community members, local food shelves, and churches mobilized to provide safe transportation, food deliveries, rent assistance, and essential resources for families.

High school students were not exempt. Several 16 and 17 year olds were pulled over by ICE agents while driving to school. One student left the following voicemail for a principal:

“ICE on Fillmore, down the block! Ah hey Principal (name redacted), this is (name redacted) I’m just leaving a message to you, ah, me and (name redacted) got pulled over this morning, 8:15 or so, on Fillmore Avenue right down by the school, down off of ah 51st I think right there. And we got pulled over by three ICE agents, unmarked vehicles, ah, they pulled over another student, assumingly us by extension we were in front of them. They let both of us go but they are looming very close near the school. Ah, please let me know as soon as you get this message. I just want to ensure safety of our students. Thank you.”

The impact on our students has occurred on three distinct levels. First are the children who were directly detained by armed ICE agents and transported over 1,300 miles away to detention centers in Texas. Second are the children who remained in their homes for extended periods, often for months, attending school virtually out of fear. At the peak, approximately 800 students in our district were learning online, despite our firm belief that the best learning occurs in person, in vibrant classrooms with teachers and peers.

The third group includes students who were not in danger of being detained but lived in constant fear due to the pervasive ICE presence in our community. These students asked questions no child should have to ask: “Could I be taken?” “Will my mom be home when I get back from school?”

Six of the seven detained students have since returned home, and most of our elementary students have come back to in-person learning. However, as they return, we are observing clear and concerning signs of trauma. While children are resilient and I am cautious not to generalize, the patterns we are seeing are consistent and significant.

We are seeing increased separation anxiety, with students struggling to be apart from their parents during the school day after months of confinement and fear. We are seeing heightened difficulty with transitions. One student who was detained in Texas now experiences distress when leaving the classroom, reporting that separation from their trusted teacher removes a sense of safety.

We are also seeing increased stress-response behaviors, including fight, flight, and freeze reactions among students who experienced direct or indirect trauma. Students are more fearful of strangers and unfamiliar vehicles, particularly SUVs or individuals in uniform, which they often associate with ICE agents. Even distant sirens can trigger anxiety. During a recent tornado drill, some students asked whether they were sheltering because of ICE.

Students are expressing deep concerns about housing instability, food insecurity, and financial hardship. Many have experienced abrupt moves, leaving behind belongings and facing uncertainty about their future. These experiences are contributing to a profound sense of instability and insecurity.

While there are signs of gradual improvement and students are expressing excitement about going outside or returning to everyday activities, there remains a persistent, underlying fear of ICE and family separation. This fear is now part of their daily reality.

Operation Metro Surge will have lasting and deeply harmful effects on our students, families, and broader school community for years to come.