



# Immigration Policy Priority Brief

## Immigration Access to Education

### What is Immigrant Access to Education?

Immigrant access to education refers to the right and ability of children from immigrant families, regardless of their immigration status, to attend public schools and receive the same educational opportunities as other students. This includes access to primary and secondary education, as well as supportive programs that address the unique challenges immigrant students often face, such as language barriers, cultural differences, and economic disadvantages.

As stated by the Supreme Court in the [Plyer v. Doe](#) decision (the case that upheld the right of all children to enroll in and attend public school, regardless of immigration status), “education has a fundamental role in maintaining the fabric of our society.” Education serves as a critical foundation for immigrant children and their families to integrate into society, build social capital, and improve their economic prospects. Ensuring immigrant access to education is not only a matter of fairness but also a fundamental part of promoting equity within Southern states.

### Immigrant Access to Education in the South

In the South, policies regarding immigrant access to education vary widely from state to state. While federal laws guarantee the right of undocumented children to receive public education, some Southern states have enacted laws that create barriers for immigrant families, especially undocumented individuals, from fully accessing educational resources.

Several trends and issues highlight the current status of this priority. While immigrant children are legally entitled to public education, certain lawmakers are drumming up conversations around the costs associated with this education and are laying out strategies to deny free education to undocumented students. Many Southern states are grappling with how to provide adequate language services to the [growing population of English language learners](#) (ELLs). Although some states have expanded bilingual education and resources for ELL students (such as [Georgia’s Dual Language Immersion Initiative](#)), there is still a significant gap in the availability of quality language programs, making it difficult for immigrant children [to keep up with their peers academically](#).

In terms of access to higher education, Southern states vary in terms of the adoption of [tuition equity laws or policies](#). In Texas and Virginia, students who meet certain criteria, regardless of immigration status, can pay in-state tuition for their higher education pursuits. In Georgia, some college systems deny enrollment, while in Alabama and South Carolina, enrollment to undocumented students is banned entirely.

## **How Immigrant Access to Education Can Advance Equity in the South**

Ensuring immigrant access to education is essential for [advancing racial and class equity](#) in the South, as it addresses systemic inequities that marginalize immigrant communities based on race, class, and legal status. Guaranteeing access to quality public education helps these students acquire the skills necessary to achieve financial stability, fostering economic equity as immigrant families integrate more fully into the broader economy. The [Presidents' Alliance on Higher Education and Immigration](#) highlights that educational access is essential for integrating immigrant families into the economy, leading to long-term economic and social benefits for both individuals and society. Education equips immigrant families, who often face economic hardships, with the tools needed for upward mobility.

Many immigrant communities in the South, particularly those of color, face compounded racial inequities. By dismantling systemic barriers and ensuring access to education, states can help close achievement gaps for Black and Brown students, ultimately strengthening the workforce and economy as skilled and educated immigrants contribute to regional growth and innovation.