

Chairman Scott, Ranking Member Foxx, and members of the Committee,

Thank you for providing me an opportunity to speak with you this morning about the issues facing immigrant students and their families, in San Antonio and across the country. My name is Pedro Martinez, and I serve as the superintendent of the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD) in San Antonio, Texas. The district covers the urban core of San Antonio, serving approximately 49,000 students at over 90 campuses.

I am also the board chair and a member of Chiefs for Change, a nonprofit, bipartisan network of state and district education leaders committed to improving student outcomes. The more than 30 chiefs who are a part of the network oversee education systems that collectively serve more than 7 million students across the United States. My fellow members and I share a core belief that all children should be free to learn, free from fear—and that schools should be safe and welcoming places for all children and their families. It is not only our legal obligation to serve all students who come through our doors, but also our moral obligation.

As someone who was born in Mexico myself, I know the experience of being an immigrant student and an English Language Learner firsthand. With the support of the public schools in Chicago, the Catholic Church, and a strong family of 12, I was able to succeed in becoming the first in my family to graduate from high school, college, and graduate school. It fills me with pride that most of my younger siblings have followed the same path. In fact, three of them are now teachers in Chicago Public Schools. Our story shows the greatness of this country: My parents never had a job where they earned over \$7/hour—and now all of their living children have risen out of poverty and are proud Americans helping improve our nation including a veteran who served three tours in IRAQ as a proud marine.

In San Antonio, we also have a history of proud high school graduates moving on to contribute to the workforce, the community, and the country. Nearly nine out of every ten students in our district identifies as Hispanic/Latino. Roughly 70 percent of our students are considered at risk, while almost 90 percent qualify as economically disadvantaged. We continue to see impressive performance across all subgroups: graduation and college going rates are on the rise, while dropout rates are falling. The diversity of our students is a source of strength and pride for our district.

San Antonio itself is a city rich with immigrants. They are productive and hard-working individuals who become great contributors to the community and our schools. Even when families struggle because of lack of official paperwork, parents of immigrant children have been some of the most responsive and supportive parents in our community, at their school, and at their church. However, recently, San Antonio has felt more like “an underground culture” where people stay in the shadows, support others quietly, and rarely go to community resource centers for help.

Having led SAISD for the past 4 and a half years, I have seen a remarkable turn in the conditions for our immigrant students and their families. Conditions in SAISD changed dramatically in the spring of 2017 due to both the election of President Trump and the Texas legislature passing Senate Bill 4. The combined effect of these events has led to fear in my community. This atmosphere contributed to student attendance rates dropping, parents and other family members becoming less likely to attend school events, and some enrollment decline.

I have witnessed a growing culture of fear within the community among immigrants, many of whom are afraid to send their children to school because they fear arrest and deportation. These fears have risen in both documented and undocumented residents and undoubtedly impact the health and happiness of our students. Here are some quotes that reflect the fear in San Antonio:

- 1) “Although my children were born here [U.S], I’m always nervous about enrolling them in certain school programs that ask for my information. I don’t want the school to know that I don’t have a status here.”
- 2) “I get so worried every time I drive my children to school. My neighbor recently got deported after the police stopped him and his children on their way to school. For this reason, I don’t drive as much or engage in school events.”
- 3) “I have a son in 5th grade who constantly asks me if I’m going to get deported. It breaks my heart because I can’t tell him that it won’t happen to me.”

I have witnessed that the strength of the family unit is what makes these families so successful despite many incredible struggles. The fear of a tear in that family unit, or the effort to regain strength because of a tear in that family unit, shows

up as a great and enduring scar on the body of humanity. A great suffering for lack of compassion.

It is evident that our community in San Antonio is dealing with trauma resulting from the uncertainty around immigration status. In this environment, we have built out a strong response by creating a Welcome Center that is a safe space for all families to get the support they need. Students from Mexico to Afghanistan have passed through our doors, and we will do whatever is necessary to ensure the students are prepared to succeed in school. Here, we provide academic testing, resources and social services by a Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW) to our families.

Additionally, we partnered with community organizers, teachers, and local lawyers to design a handbook that spelled out the proper relationship between school district police and the community at our schools in both English and Spanish. The handbook clarifies the exact role of police in our schools and ensures that they do not act as immigration authorities. Our schools are open to everyone regardless of immigration status. That is the law, and we ensure that the law is followed at all of our campuses. To ensure that we are providing proper resources, we have also trained our counselors in best practices on how to support our immigrant students, their families, and fellow community members.

We have also made available trainings to all of our educators to ensure they are properly aware of these issues. Many teachers have also completed “Know Your Rights” trainings, and they have even led them for students in the district. As a result, our community is far more aware of the legal situation surrounding immigration and the rights that all people have. These trainings should create the conditions so that students can ideally excel in our public schools. Many schools in SAISD now host “Pláticas” which are conversations that are designed to be safe spaces for all students and families.

While it is illegal for us to inquire about our students’ legal status, we know that we have many students who are not U.S. citizens. Since in SAISD, we want to make sure that all students have the opportunity to go to college, we have organized an annual Dream Summit for undocumented students to learn about opportunities for accessing higher education opportunities. Additionally, we have expanded our college counseling programs across the district, and have trained our staff to offer proper guidance to any undocumented students.

Overall, this immigration climate has made it far more challenging for SAISD. However, we see each day what is possible. Last school year, SAISD had the largest achievement gains of any large district in Texas. In the last four years, we have become the fastest improving urban district in the state of Texas. Thank you for the opportunity to share SAISD's story.