

Immigrant Families and Children

What Kids Need

Philadelphia's population is growing because more and more immigrants are choosing to call Philadelphia home. Today, more than 25% of Philadelphians were born outside the U.S. and contribute billions to the city's tax base.

Still, immigrant families can often be considered an afterthought in public policy. For immigrant parents, that means less access to existing supports, less opportunities to participate in the child's education in the U.S., and a safety net that is smaller and more likely to become strained.

As Philadelphia becomes increasingly diverse, it is incumbent on the next mayor to make sure the public systems within their control provide the same level of service to children and families across language and country of origin.

The next mayor must:

- Affirmatively state that Philadelphia will remain a welcoming city and reject federal efforts that target any resident based solely on immigration status.
- Audit, enforce, and improve the City's language access policies.
- Hire more bilingual staff in city government, especially in departments that provide direct services. Target languages should at minimum include the 5 most spoken languages in Philadelphia: Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese Mandarin, Haitian Creole, and Vietnamese.
- Create and fund a community navigator program or outreach grants for smaller, high-needs immigrant communities so that people whose languages are less spoken can connect with city services.
- Mandate training for all city staff on how to provide culturally competent, trauma-informed care.
- Direct the school board appointees to expand the bilingual cultural assistant (BCA) program and deploy BCAs so that families living in areas with the least language access support can connect with their schools.
- Advocate at the state level so undocumented students qualify for in-state tuition and higher ed benefits.
- Advocate at the state level to permit children regardless of immigration status to enroll in public benefits including summer work opportunities.

Why This Matters To Kids, Parents and, The City

Philadelphia thrives when immigrant children and families thrive. Immigrant children and families thrive when they are fully knitted into Philadelphia's public life. That means they can seamlessly access the city services their tax dollars support and that their requests for support are met with answers that are culturally competent and trauma informed. It means their wider communities have ties to city government so that they receive news promptly when announcements for new programs are released. It means being tied to their children's school life so that their kids do not have to navigate their education alone.

At a basic level, immigrant children and families thrive when they know they are safe in Philadelphia – that while urgency to pass immigration reform might ebb and flow at the federal level, the city where they've chosen to settle remains stalwartly committed to carving out a wide berth for them to live. They must live without fear of their families being separated due to aggressive immigration enforcement at other levels of government. They must know that Philadelphia is advocating for broader policies that allow their children to have access to healthcare and affordable higher education.

That Philadelphia prospers when immigrant children and families do is well documented. In addition to strengthening the city's many neighborhood corridors, the combined household income of immigrant families was nearly \$27 billion in 2017, which increased by \$3 billion in a single year. Immigrant families are also entering Philadelphia's workforce at a rapid pace, growing by 89% between 2000 and 2016. This all contributes to the city's economy and, by extension, our collective well-being, which is why the next mayor must affirm and create more ways to foster ties with immigrant children and families.

The Details

If Philadelphia is on the rebound, it is largely due to immigration. From 2000 to 2016, Philadelphia's population increased for the first time in nearly half a century, with hundreds and thousands of immigrants moving to the area. These immigrants largely come from Asia and the Caribbean with immigrants from Africa and Latin America growing quickly. In addition to their respective cultures, the immigrant families in Philadelphia speak different languages at different levels. The School District of Philadelphia alone reports that as of 2022, students attending District-run schools speak at least 155 different languages at home with the number of English Language Learners (ELL) growing. Regardless of their country of origin, immigrants have not only contributed financially to the city's operations through taxes, they've regenerated Philadelphia's neighborhood corridors with restaurants and other small businesses.

Despite their contributions to the city's cultural fabric and functions, immigrant families are often disconnected from public systems. A fear of interventions by federal immigration enforcement discourages immigrant families from fully engaging in public life. Language barriers and a lack of knowledge about processes and customs in the U.S. further prevent communities from accessing supports that would otherwise be available.

Indeed, a 2011 Research For Action study, which found that students in immigrant households often navigate the high school selection process without much parent support. Parents could only provide limited guidance due to their lack of understanding of the process's intricacies.

To make sure immigrant children and families can fully contribute to Philadelphia, the mayor must, first and foremost, renew their commitment to Philadelphia being a welcoming city that does not collaborate with federal immigration authorities if requests are made outside the bounds of federal law. Such public messaging should be sustained throughout the administration and emphasized whenever anti-immigrant sentiment rises in the public eye so that immigrant communities can trust the terrain they live.

The next mayor must also develop the language supports available to immigrant communities so that families can connect with the city. For one, the mayor should consider contracting with a company to audit how city departments implement language access policies from the perspective of a resident. Though city departments have done much to establish language access plans, the mayor can see whether the procedures work in practice to facilitate interactions with everyday residents to avoid confusing workarounds or discourtesy that can be enough to discourage a resident from seeking help.

Still, nothing beats being able to converse with a person in the moment in one's native language without having to wait for an interpreter. Thus, the mayor must take pains to encourage the hiring of bilingual or multilingual staff particularly in departments with frequent interactions with the public and in the five most commonly-spoken languages in Philadelphia. For smaller immigrant communities, the mayor must allocate funds for grants to community organizations or the hiring of community navigators so that people whose languages are less spoken can get the concerted help they need.

In schools, **the mayor can direct the school board to expand the bilingual cultural assistant program** so that schools where there is need for language supports are staffed with a person who can actively engage families.

Finally, just as the mayor must be staunch in the city's support of all immigrants when reaffirming the city's welcoming status, so, too, **must the mayor advocate on the state level for more inclusive policies** that support families regardless of citizenship status. That means advocating for undocumented students to be eligible for in-state college tuition and other public benefits for higher education and undocumented children to receive health insurance. Taking these steps at the state level is another way the mayor demonstrates how Philadelphia's welcoming stance extends beyond rhetoric.

About The Kids Campaign

The Kids Campaign is a coalition of 60 plus child-serving groups in Philadelphia. Our coalition formed to make sure that the next mayor of Philadelphia is ready to do whatever it takes to ensure a **S.E.C.U.R.E.** future for every kid – a future with Safety, an Education, Careers, Uplift, Recreation, and a healthy Environment. A non-partisan effort, the Kids Campaign will share information parents and voters need to determine which candidate will make every day safer than the one before for children and youth. Organizations and individuals can learn more and join the Kids Campaign at www.thekidscampaign.org.