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Forum Indicates City Overreacted To Immigration Inquiry at Queens School | Open Articles

CRYSTAL LEWIS

4-5 minutes

On its midterm exam to find the balance between protecting children in schools and unnecessarily drumming up fears about undocumented immigrants, the de Blasio administration earned a middling grade.

Denied Intent to Deport

The crowd at a United Federation of Teachers forum on immigration May 15 applauded the news that staff at a Queens elementary school turned away two U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services agents. But Teamsters Local 237 President Greg Floyd, who represents School Safety Agents, raised questions as to whether the attention the incident received created more fear.

According to a USCIS spokesperson, agents visited P. S. 58 in Maspeth on May 11 for an “administrative inquiry pertaining to an immigration-benefit request” and did not ask to speak with the student.

Initial reports of the incident misrepresented the situation. Mayor de Blasio's Press Secretary, Eric Phillips, tweeted two days after it occurred that Federal immigration agents showed up at the school to ask about a fourth grader, indicating that they were from Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

In March, the Mayor released guidelines for schools that prevent ICE agents from entering buildings without a warrant after the Trump Administration increased efforts to deport undocumented immigrants.

Steven Choi, Executive Director of the New York Immigration Coalition, explained at the UFT panel that its members were concerned about whether Teachers would have to face Federal immigrant agents when the guidelines were drafted. "We said, 'Let's make sure that whatever is coming out of the Mayor's Office is going to be explicit in saying that Teachers and Principals should not have the responsibility of having to deal with ICE.' That should be somebody else," he said.

How to Respond

If ICE agents do have a warrant, School Safety Agents and other staff must immediately call the Principal and lawyers, New York City Immigrant Affairs Commissioner Nisha Agarwal said at the forum.

But leaving the responsibility of dealing with ICE agents to school staff puts them in a difficult situation, according to Mr. Floyd.

"Our Safety Agents should not have to risk getting arrested for interfering with the Federal Government," said Mr. Floyd.

“If you get an overzealous ICE agent, do you think an unarmed School Safety Agent will be able to stop him?” he said. Instead, Mr. Floyd said he believed Mr. de Blasio should meet with the Federal Government to make schools a sanctuary.



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Whether a meeting between the Mayor and the Federal immigration agency, or even the city guidelines, were necessary was debated. No ICE agents have visited a school, according to Ms. Agarwal. And there are already measures in place to keep ICE out of schools: a 2011 agency policy states that agents are not allowed to arrest or search for people at “sensitive places” such as churches, schools or hospitals.

‘Reinvigorated Fear’

“It was total panic. Parents didn’t understand,” Councilwoman Julissa Ferreras-Copeland said in a statement about the USCIS agents’ visit to P.S. 58. “It’s great that the child was protected, but it also kind of reinvigorated that fear—‘Oh my God, they’re actually going to come to the schools.’”

Schools Chancellor Carmen Fariña visited the school on May 15 to let parents know that the incident was an isolated one. “We’re

here today to really reassure parents that our schools are safe, and that our children will be protected to the utmost degree,” she said at a press conference outside the school.

According to Mr. Floyd, the attention drawn to the guidelines and the “hyperbole” concerning what happened at P.S. 58 distracted from bigger safety threats to schools.

He noted that several assaults had occurred on school grounds in the previous few weeks. On May 16, a 17-year-old boy was stabbed outside of Maxwell High School in Brooklyn, while on May 15, a 17-year-old girl slashed a female student with razor blades in her hair at Queens Community High School. And on May 5, a group of teens attacked and stabbed another one after a dispute over a girl in front of a Queens elementary school.

“ICE is the least of our problems in the schools,” Mr. Floyd said.