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Immigrant Family Legal Clinic: A Case of Integrated Student Supports in a Community School Context

Immigration, legal status, and documentation issues continue to be highly contentious and debated topics in the United States. The Trump administration's attack on immigrants and other vulnerable people has exacerbated the need for schools to take an active role in addressing legal status (Rogers et al., 2017). Moreover, research in child development and psychology show that unauthorized youth experience less positive outcomes than their authorized peers in education and mental health (Yoshikawa et. al., 2016). Given the sensitivity related to issues of documentation status, little research has been done on how K-12 schools can address immigration and documentation issues (Ee & Gandara, 2020; Mangual Figueroa, 2017; Murillo, 2017). This descriptive case study illustrates the early stages of integrating a legal clinic's services for immigrant students and families on a K-12 community school campus. Community schools are poised to address these issues through integrated student supports framed from an asset-based perspective, which views community members and organizations as powerful constituents in the struggle for educational equity (Warren, 2005). As such, we approach our study with deep appreciation for the connection between schools and the communities they serve (Oakes et al., 2017).

Using an equity-minded school change framework (Oakes, 1992), this case study examines the technical, normative, and political processes in the development, implementation, and integration of a legal clinic for immigrant families in a K-12 community school. Data include a school staff survey and eight semi-structured interviews with school and clinic staff. Interviews were analyzed using open-coding (Saldaña, 2016) and re-coded using parent codes related to themes on immigration services and integration. Protocols on school and district sanctuary protections, agreements between administrators, the district and university, and legal clinic outreach materials were consulted to understand the context of the school in this case study.

Several key factors surfaced in the development of the clinic: navigating bureaucratic hurdles, engaging in thoughtful negotiations, strategic decision-making, buy-in from multiple stakeholders and creating strong partnerships. The study emphasizes how legal services such as direct representation and consultations provided students and families access to technical information and specialized resources that school educators could not otherwise provide. Finally, even in a school community with a strong culture of trust and safety, this study illustrates that integrating legal services requires intentional and ongoing

relationship building. Overall, this study demonstrates how community school partnerships are a potential source for supporting immigrant students and families in K-12 settings.

Keywords: Legal Clinic, Immigration Education, Immigrant Families and Children, Community Schools, Integrated Student Supports, Research Practice Partnerships

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