

Critical incidents in Immigrant Education

Directions: In small groups, read the following critical incidents and craft a response to each. Each of these incidents has been chosen because they can or did really happen. You will write an example of your own at the end. Keep in mind that one of the many jobs of a teacher is to be an advocate for each and every student, but that is difficult to do without prior thought as to what an advocate does. We will discuss responses to each incident as a large group.

1. You have planned a unit around immigration that has been received really well by the students. As part of this unit, students are writing about the immigrant stories of their families. One of your highest achievers approaches you and says that his mom came here led by a man only named “Coyote” from Mexico, and that she had to hide in the back of a van. What is your response?

In this case, the student teacher thanked the student for contributing and moved on with the lesson. She deliberated quite a bit about how to respond. She was also of Mexican descent and had undocumented family members. She didn't want to convey to the student that he couldn't share his family's immigration story, but she also wanted to keep the student and his family safe. She decided to call the student's mother. The mother thanked her for reaching out.

2. After a new law was passed (ala Alabama/Oklahoma), your district is now collecting information on the citizenship status of your students. Your immigrant students, even those that are here legally, have stopped coming to school for fear of being deported. What is your response?

In 2011, the state of Alabama enacted a law that required school administrators to inquire about students' immigration status, resulting in a high number of Latino students absent from school. In some cases, teachers were asked to collect this information. This was state law was later blocked by federal courts under Plyer vs. Doe.

3. One of your Hmong students asks to go to the nurse after lunch every Thursday (which happens to be Papa John's pizza day) and occasionally other days of the week, too. She seems to be not feeling well often enough to cause you concern. What is your response?

Lactose intolerance is particularly prevalent in communities of East Asian descent. This student population was newly arrived and had few food options other than what was provided at school. When the school offered an alternate lunch option, students no longer experienced discomfort.

4. You are in the cafeteria and you hear one of the staff say “I don't know why all those people had to come here.” Before you get a chance to answer, another staff responds with, “It's because we give out social services here like candy. The legislature has made it so anyone can get handouts. It's ridiculous.” What is your response?

This is a common immigration myth. In the state where this took place, there are a high number of refugees due to strong family ties and secondary migration. While there are social services in

place, it is not easy to qualify for them and newcomers generally rely on them only during the transition period.

5. Your Somali high school student is sweating profusely and looks very dizzy. She tells you she has her period. What do you do?

In this case, the teacher didn't realize the severity of the incident. She asked the student to lie down and offered her a blanket. The principal called 911. This student experienced female genital mutilation (FGM). She was experiencing toxic shock, due to a blockage in menstruation.

6. A year ago, a health teacher asked his class to do a simple assignment. He wanted them to list five of their favorite foods as young children and then list their favorite foods now. The Cambodian students in the class did not do the task and were very upset about it. Why were they upset? How would you respond?

The Cambodian students in this class spent their childhoods in a refugee camp where they were served the same porridge for every meal of the day. Asking them to discuss their favorite childhood foods was an impossible task and proved to be triggering for them.

7. You notice that a group of Latino students consistently wears L.A. Dodgers jerseys and hats to school. When you ask them about the team, they don't appear to know anything about the Dodgers or baseball. What do you make of this new trend?

In this case, a local gang (originating in Latin America) had begun using the LA Dodgers symbol as their gang symbol. This group of students was showing affiliation with the gang.

8. The parent of one of your Somali female students asks you to call home if you see the student without her hijab. How do you respond?

In this case, the teacher decided to consult the principal about the school policy. The school policy was that teachers were only tasked with contacting parents if students were in violation of the school dress code. In other cases, they were not to contact parents. This practice varies from school to school.

9. You have students from war-torn countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan. The Fourth of July is approaching and you know that there will be a fireworks display in your town. Why might it be important to tell your students about this in advance?

The sound and sight of fireworks can be distressing for newcomers that have experienced war. It is helpful for them to know ahead of time that there will be fireworks and that it isn't a cause for concern.

10. Your class is completing a standardized test. They are working on a section about where things belong at home. One question states:

Where is the most logical place to keep your toothbrush?

- a) In the refrigerator
- b) Near the sink
- c) In the garage
- d) Under the bed

A large number of your ELs choose answer A. Why? How do you respond?

We agree that this is a bizarre question for a test! In this case, the students who chose “A” did so because they came from a tropical climate where cockroaches were common. They kept their toothbrushes in the refrigerator to keep them clean.

11. Now you write an example that is specific to your school.