



Obama prepares schools for migrant kids

By Mario Trujillo - 08/13/14 02:39 PM EDT

The Obama administration is preparing the nation's schools to accept thousands of new students who illegally crossed the southwest border and are now awaiting trials on their possible deportations.

A fact sheet from the Department of Education sent to states and schools on Monday highlights the children's right to attend public school.

It says all children in the United States "are entitled to equal access to a public elementary and secondary education, regardless of their or their parents' actual or perceived national origin, citizenship, or immigration status."

The prospect of tens of thousands of children mostly from Central American countries attending school as they wait for their immigration status to be decided has the potential to be explosive after this summer's emotional public debate about the border.

Several Republican governors have blasted the federal government for releasing many of the minors to sponsors in their home states, and protests in which demonstrators blocked buses from delivering immigrants to shelters **erupted** in June and July.

Now some state officials are worried about the additional costs they'll endure from educating the children.

"There are many consequences of the federal government's failure to secure the border and the fiscal impact of educating unaccompanied alien children is certainly one of them," said Travis Considine, a spokesman for Texas Gov. Rick Perry (R).

Around 63,000 children, mostly from the Central American countries of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, have been apprehended this year trying to cross the border.

Many are in the 150 or so shelters operated around the country by the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Department of Education said those children would attend classes in those facilities.

A total of 37,477 children have been released to an appropriate adult sponsor, usually a parent, relative or family friend, according to the Office of Refugee Resettlement. Those children, who have been settled in all 50 states, would all be eligible to attend public school.

Many of the children could be spending the next school year in the United States.

Francisco Negron, general council for the National School Board Association, said there is no question that schools will accommodate the children.

"Public schools are keenly aware of their obligations to follow the law," he said, the children "come to us to receive their services and they'll get them."

But Michael Zola, head of federal advocacy for the school board association, said many question remain about the placement of the children and how long they will stay.

"A lot of folks at the local level want to know with a better sense of granularity what those actual numbers are for planning purposes," he said.

The average immigration proceeding in the past has taken an average of more than 500 days, but the administration has given priority to the children to move to the front of the line, in an attempt to speed up the deportation process.

The Obama administration has blamed the influx of unaccompanied children on drug-cartel-fueled violence in the three Central American

countries, while Republicans in Congress have said White House policies have led many of the children to believe they will be able to stay if they cross the border.

They have particularly criticized Obama's decision to not defer certain people brought to the United States illegally as children. The White House is considering additional executive actions on the border, and it is under pressure from some activists to broaden its policies deferring deportations.

Congress failed this summer to agree to legislation to provide additional support for agencies handling the deluge of immigrants, with the House approving a \$694 million bill focused on security and the Senate not moving any legislation.

The Obama administration has urged people to welcome the new immigrants, though it has also said that most of the children who have fled to the United States will be sent back to their home countries.

"Schools in the United States have always welcomed new immigrant children to their classrooms — according to the most recent data, there were more than 840,000 immigrant students in the United States, and more than 4.6 million English learners," the **fact sheet** said.

The civil rights divisions of the departments of Justice and Education sent a letter in May warning districts to avoid enrollment practices that could "chill or discourage" children from signing up for school due to their perceived immigration status.

"These practices contravene Federal law," the **May 8 letter** stated.

The letter pointed out that having children provide Social Security numbers or race and ethnicity data when enrolling must be only voluntary. It also said the age of the children could be proven using foreign records.

So far this year, sponsors in Texas have taken on the highest number of children, with 5,280. Other large states trail slightly behind, including New York (4,244), California (3,909) and Florida (3,809).

An official with the Florida Department of Education downplayed the difficulty of accomodating the children, noting that Florida "has 2.7 million K-12 students" and that hundreds of people move in and out of the system on a daily basis.

School districts themselves would ultimately determine how manageable the increase is, the official added.

More than 1,000 children have been released in each of six other states — Virginia, North Carolina, New Jersey, Maryland, Louisiana and Georgia.

Concerns about the health of the child immigrants have also run rampant over the summer.

In its fact sheet, the Education Department points out the children receive vaccinations while in HHS custody.

The fact sheet highlights a number of federal resources that could be available to the children including programs to learn English. It also takes note of a U.S. law guaranteeing educational access to homeless children, a definition that could apply to some of the migrant children.

This story was updated at 5:41 p.m.

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