

The Everyday Lives of Immigrant Students and their Families

By: Marah Hauser

In the United States, all children are entitled to a free public education. Unfortunately, students who do not speak English as their first language often struggle in public school systems due to a lack of support. This is not just an issue in the classrooms of border states, but an issue all over the United States. It affects children who attend schools in Northeast Ohio.

Maria Cisneros is an ELL teacher at Perry Elementary School, working specifically with kindergarteners. For the past 6 years, this is what Cisneros' daily life has looked like. She works not only with the students in her classroom, but their families as well. She says her main goal is to help students learn English and help their families get involved with their education, which she works toward everyday.

Maria Cisneros' job goes farther than being just a teacher. She teaches more than just basic education, as she also teaches them things like which bathroom to go into and how to order lunch. She informs the parents of everything going on at the school. Without her, it's likely that the parents of these ELL students would be left in the dark, clueless without a support system, and even the students themselves would have a very hard time understanding what goes on in school.

Beyond addressing students' educational needs, Cisneros helps them and their families get through personal struggles. One of the hardest parts of her job is getting attached to her students. Working one-on-one with these students creates a much more personal bond with them. Since she's been working as an ELL teacher, she's seen two of her students' families taken into custody for being illegal immigrants. She says she can't even imagine being torn apart from your family when you do not even understand what's going on. Cisneros wants to remind people that there is so much going on in these students' lives that so many struggle to understand. Many people are very quick to judge, without having much knowledge.

A common misconception about immigrants is that they drain community resources more than regular students, but that definitely isn't the case. "I think that the immigrant community contributes to the community just as much as any other person. Most of the time the working immigrants can't claim tax refunds so a majority of that money stays in the system. Nor can the immigrants, depending on legal status, claim any type of government funding, social security pensions, or any type of help," Mrs. Cisneros says.

It is hard to argue that the incoming immigrants are draining community and government resources when often their main goal is to remain hidden from the government. Getting involved with any sort of assistance program, offered on a federal or state level, could easily get them caught and taken in by border patrol officers.

Outsiders also often think these students are just 'dumb', but Cisneros explains they are actually very smart, demonstrating the ability to learn two languages at once while also working toward receiving the best education possible for them.

Originally, the ELL program wasn't offered in Perry, and students had to go to Painesville to take the class. Cisneros worries with the threat of the power plant shutting down, that the class could be cut.

“The program is already short staffed, with any budget cuts, I do not know if we could successfully run it as it should be run” Cisneros says. She worries budget cuts will only make all the pressure on these students worse. The number of students is increasing, but the number of teachers are decreasing. “When considering the amount of ELL support staff that we have in comparison to the increasing need for help, it is difficult for us to have the students spread out to receive genuine one-on-one care in classrooms,” she says.

This is only the beginning of a larger discussion. These students rely on classes like these to get through school, and would face much bigger challenges without the help of educators like her.

Despite the hardships, Maria Cisneros understands the importance of her job. She plans to continue helping these kids and families get through school and adjust to everything they need. “I love helping the students, seeing them grow throughout the course of the year and as they move on forward throughout elementary, middle school and high school. Throughout the years I have built such great relationships with our ELL families, and our staff here at Perry High School.”