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No country can thrive when it treats its own families, students and workers as enemies. Yet in Chicago this fall, some parents have faced an impossible choice: Send their children to school under the shadow of immigration raids or keep them home, knowing remote learning often leads to worse outcomes. At the same time, the federal government is stripping funding from Hispanic- and other minority-serving institutions that educate the nation's fastest-growing student populations. And with the federal shutdown, nearly a million workers — from airport screeners to food safety inspectors — are bracing for furloughs or missed paychecks.

These aren't separate emergencies. Together, they add up to a direct attack on mobility — the very ladder that has long defined America's promise.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids in Illinois, part of a federal initiative called "Operation Midway Blitz," have already led to arrests and even a fatal shooting in the suburbs and a second shooting on the Southwest Side. Families retreat indoors. Children miss school. Trust in public institutions erodes. Sanctuary policies mean little if federal agents are visible on the streets, chilling everyday participation in classrooms, clinics and churches. A nation cannot out-innovate its rivals if millions of residents live in fear of being seen. Latino students already make up [more than a quarter](#) of Illinois' enrollment; when those students shrink from public life, the whole state loses.

Meanwhile, the Department of Education has announced it will end critical grants for institutions that serve minority populations, including Hispanics. These grants fund tutoring, advising, language support and workforce preparation. Their disappearance will hit students who are disproportionately first generation, low income and immigrant.

In Illinois, [58 organizations](#) that serve Hispanics stand to lose resources that help students transfer, graduate and enter the workforce. National organizations warn that rescinding this support erases decades of progress. A recent analysis from the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago underscores the point: [The returns to a college degree](#) benefit not only the student but also families, neighborhoods and the economy as a whole. While other countries expand investment in their higher education systems, the United States is pulling back from its most dynamic talent pool. China has dramatically [increased its college enrollment](#) since 2000; Germany offers free college. Meanwhile, the U.S. is cutting lifelines for its own fastest-growing student population.

The federal shutdown only deepens the damage. Federal jobs have long been [a ladder into the middle class](#) for Black, Latino and Native American families. They come with steady paychecks, health insurance and pensions. When Congress treats these workers as pawns in political fights, it destabilizes not just households but the nation's operational capacity. Air travel slows, food inspections lag and scientific research stalls. America's competitiveness depends on these workers, and hollowing them out is a form of economic self-sabotage.

In Chicago, talk of moving schools online under emergency conditions shows how these crises intersect. The pandemic proved remote schooling widens inequality: Students without reliable Wi-Fi, quiet study space or support at home fall behind. For Latino and low-income students, outcomes are consistently worse than for wealthier peers. Families fearful of ICE enforcement are left with a brutal choice — risk the dangers of in-person schooling or accept the diminished opportunity of online classes. Either way, the next generation's climb up the ladder of mobility is weakened.

Taken together, these actions represent more than enforcement, more than budgetary restraint. They signal a coordinated retreat from the nation's own people. Surveillance discourages participation. Defunding dismantles educational pipelines. Shutdowns destabilize middle-class jobs. Forced online

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The message is unmistakable: Communities of color, immigrant families and public workers are expendable. In the past when America treated entire communities as disposable, it created generational wounds that we are still reckoning with.

That message carries a cost well beyond those immediately targeted. The United States cannot afford to suppress its fastest-growing student populations, destabilize its federal workforce and weaken its higher education institutions if it hopes to remain competitive in a global economy. Other nations are doubling down on education, workforce stability and inclusion. We are dismantling ours.

The path forward is not complicated. Congress should restore and expand funding to minority- and Hispanic-serving institutions as investments in the nation's workforce. Schools must be protected as enforcement-free sanctuaries. Lawmakers must stop holding the federal workforce hostage in budget fights. And states and cities must do their part by stabilizing funding, expanding transfer pathways and creating emergency aid pools. These are not luxuries but rather the minimum required to keep America competitive.

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Chicago is not an outlier but a warning. If America continues to punish its communities while hollowing out its institutions, the losses will not just be measured in degrees deferred or paychecks missed. The deeper cost will be a generational loss of mobility — and with it, the competitiveness on which the nation's future depends. We have a stark choice before us: Invest in people or surrender America's edge.

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