



MDC president Eduardo Padrón speaks out in support of DACA 0:58

IMMIGRATION

Miami leaders line up to support ‘Dreamers’ and ask Trump to do the same

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With the future of a program that protects undocumented young people from deportation in question, leaders of Miami-Dade lined up Wednesday to voice their support for “Dreamers” and reassure scared kids that the community has their back.

For the past five years, undocumented immigrants brought to the U.S. by their parents when they were children could access the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program and get a work permit and driver’s license. President Donald Trump has signaled that he wants to end the program put into place by former President Barack Obama via executive order, possibly as soon as this week.

The county leaders gathered at Miami Dade College, which became “the epicenter of the ‘Dreamer’ movement” in 2010 when four undocumented students walked the 1,500 miles from the Freedom Tower to the U.S. capital to call attention to their plight.

“Today,” MDC President Eduardo Padrón told the crowd, “we’re telling them ‘we’re with you.’ ”

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Group photo of the participants during a conference at Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus on Wednesday, August 30, 2017 where dozens of education, elected, advocacy, community, faith, business and civic leaders convened to support the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

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For many leaders, their connection to the issue was personal.

Miami-Dade Schools Superintendent Alberto Carvalho pointed to himself, an unaccompanied minor who overstayed his visa, as an example of an immigrant who would have been a “Dreamer” if the program had been around when he was young.

“There is nothing more right than for our community here and beyond to stand up, to show up, to speak up, to close arms around our children, who are American in every single way but one. They were not born here,” he said.

If he’d been sent back to Cuba, Miami Mayor Tomás Regalado said, he wouldn’t be where he was today.

“It’s important that we send a message to the White House,” he said. “The message is clear. These men and women are the future. Please protect them.”

Another immigrant, Mike Fernandez, head of the Immigration Partnership and Coalition (IMPAC) Fund, put it even more directly. He turned to the dozen “Dreamer” students in the room and told them, “It’s all about you, because you are what we used to be.”



Mike Fernandez listens to a speaker during a conference at Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus on Wednesday, August 30, 2017 where dozens of education, elected, advocacy, community, faith, business and civic leaders convened to support the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

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One of those “Dreamers,” 20-year-old Javiera Garate, said she has big plans, but she can’t reach them without DACA. She’s at MDC studying to become a nurse anesthetist and eventually hopes to go to medical school to become an anesthesiologist.

She pointed to the DACA card she keeps in her wallet and said that without it she couldn’t study. If the DACA program is gone when her protection expires next year, she might have to go back to her native Chile, a country she hasn’t seen since she was 4.

“I just hope they do something for us,” she said. “Something permanent.”

Cheryl Little, executive director of Americans for Immigrant Justice, asked everyone in the room to support the “Recognizing America’s Children Act,” a bill submitted by Miami Republican Rep. Carlos Curbelo that would offer a path to citizenship for law-abiding undocumented immigrants who entered the country as children.

“It is time to unleash the dream,” she said.

During a national telephone press conference set up by the activist group Stand Up for Dreamers, Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said he’ll ask his state’s attorney general to intervene to defend the program in court if the Trump administration refuses to do so.

The Republican attorneys general of 10 states have warned Trump that they’ll file suit to demand suspension of DACA unless he starts dismantling it. DACA is not a law passed by Congress but an executive order issued by Obama, and it can be dissolved at the stroke of a presidential pen.

The states’ threat of a lawsuit is a potent one. They already sued to block another, similar Obama order on immigration, and won in federal court.

The threat leaves Trump with several options. He can abolish DACA, extend it, use it as a bargaining chip with Congress to obtain funding for anti-immigration measures — or simply stand aside and refuse to defend it in court as the states attack it.

Insee said his state — perhaps in a coalition with others, like California, that have strongly supported DACA — might take over the program's defense.

“We're hoping it doesn't come to that,” he added, insisting that DACA beneficiaries are “one of the feel-good stories in my state and in the nation.”

Although Trump could end DACA any day, immigration experts agree that the end would likely come slowly over time. No one would be deported immediately, they said. That reassurance does little to calm immigrants (under DACA protection or not) anxious about their future.

The Miami-Dade and Broward schools superintendents stressed that no matter what happens with DACA, undocumented immigrants should feel safe sending their children to school.

“We have never, nor will we ever — and this is in accordance with federal law — ask about the immigration status of children or their parents,” Carvalho said. “That to us is sacrosanct.”



Alberto Carvalho, Superintendent of Miami-Dade County Public Schools, during a conference at Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus on Wednesday, August 30, 2017 where dozens of education, elected, advocacy, community, faith, business and civic leaders convened to support the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

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Families concerned about their immigration status should feel comfortable approaching school officials, who are referring students and their families to counseling services and to outside organizations that provide assistance to undocumented immigrants, the district leaders said.

“We believe they’ve done nothing wrong, that they should have an opportunity to get a high-quality education,” said Broward Schools Superintendent Robert Runcie, speaking Wednesday morning on a conference call organized by Chiefs for Change, a bipartisan coalition of state and district education leaders. “We’re in the education business, not deportation,” he added. “We have to educate kids no matter where they come from.”

Neither Miami-Dade nor Broward know how many of their students are benefiting from DACA, which students can apply for in most cases starting at age 15. Carvalho said that since school started last week, he’s visited more than 30 schools and met numerous students who expressed fear about their immigration status.

“A couple of them at the high school level approached me seeking help,” Carvalho said. “That really broke my heart, the uncertainty that they feel.”

Both the Miami-Dade and Broward school boards have also been vocal in their support for undocumented immigrant students, passing school board items in March that publicly declared schools a safe place for immigrants.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s current policy states that immigration enforcement at sensitive locations like schools and churches should be avoided except in extreme circumstances or with the approval of a high-level official, but activists say symbolic gestures like the school board proclamations help communicate to immigrant families that their children are safe at school.

Despite the divided political climate nationally, Runcie said his district has not received any public criticism for their stance. “Given the demographics of where we are it’s been very strongly supported,” he said. Runcie cited a Morning Consult and Politico poll from April that showed 78 percent of registered voters nationwide said “Dreamers” should be allowed to stay in the U.S. and more than half expressed support for a path to citizenship for these young people.



Monica Lazaro , a Dreamer from Honduras, speaks during a conference at Miami Dade College’s Wolfson Campus on Wednesday, August 30, 2017 where dozens of education, elected, advocacy, community, faith, business and civic leaders convened to support the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.
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At Wednesday’s news conference, Honduran “Dreamer” Monica Lazaro begged everyone in the room to call their elected representative and ask them to support a path to citizenship, or a permanent solution to the crisis dreamers face.

“And to all the dreamers, I ask you to keep your hopes up,” she said. “Keep fighting. Let’s be strong.”

MIAMI HERALD STAFFER GLENN GARVIN CONTRIBUTED TO THIS REPORT.





Eduardo Padrón, president of Miami Dade College, during a conference at Miami Dade College's Wolfson Campus on Wednesday, August 30, 2017 where dozens of education, elected, advocacy, community, faith, business and civic leaders convened to support the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. **Roberto Koltun** - rkoltun@miamiherald.com

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