

GATESOL Position Statement on Higher Education for Undocumented Students in Georgia

Georgia Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (GATESOL) is a non-profit organization whose goals are to encourage professional development, participation, and leadership within the state of Georgia; to provide opportunity for study and research; to work cooperatively toward the improvement of instruction in all programs which seek to provide students with an opportunity to acquire English language skills and proficiency; and to promote an understanding of the cultures of non-native speakers of English.

SB 458 would eliminate the possibility for undocumented students to attend public institutions of higher education in the state of Georgia. As teachers of English language learners, we observe firsthand the impact that laws and policies such as this have on our students and school communities. Legislation that places a major road block to higher education effectively removes the incentive for the most academically gifted students to complete high school. Without a viable opportunity to attend college and further their education, students have little motivation to stay in school, achieve high standards, and graduate. As teachers, we are greatly concerned about the effect this legislation would have on classroom morale for both undocumented and documented students alike. Moreover, we know this legislation would negatively impact Georgia's high school graduation rate, which is already one of the lowest in the nation.

Teachers are charged with the responsibility of seeing that all students pass state standardized tests, make gains on those tests, remain in school, and graduate. Upcoming changes to the teacher evaluation system promise to tie teacher salaries to academic performance. A ban on higher education for undocumented students would not only hurt students, but it could also have negative consequences for all teachers throughout the state. This legislation could in fact result in the loss of some of our best teachers, who in spite of great efforts, would be unable to motivate students to learn and stay in school.

As teachers, we get to know the students who are targeted in this bill and their stories personally. These students were brought to the country at a young age and are blameless for their undocumented status. They have overcome great challenges in order to acquire English, adapt to our culture, and make the grades to graduate from high school. Those who have the academic qualifications to be accepted into college are truly exceptional. This is supported by the fact that less than one-tenth of one percent of students in the University System of Georgia are undocumented. These few and exceptionally talented students are precisely the types of individuals we should encourage to continue their education. In the words of Chancellor Huckaby,

“Graduating more students is a key goal of the System as we work to help Georgia prosper. Even for those who are there through no fault of their own, it makes sense to me that we should educate them to the highest level possible. It helps our state economically, culturally, and educationally.” (Testimony of the University System of Georgia on SB 458, 2/27/2012)

GATESOL opposes SB 458 as well as any measure to limit access to higher education for undocumented students on the basis that

- Education is a basic human right and is essential for the betterment of American society.
- Higher education has been shown as a key to a more healthy and productive life.
- Georgia would stand at odds with 48 other states, all of which provide access to higher education for undocumented students.
- It is morally unjust to punish children for their parents' misdeeds.
- Denying undocumented students a chance at higher education solves no problem, but it is sure to create many more.

If you pass this bill, you will be littering our classrooms with the broken lives and dreams of children who will be denied access to higher education and the opportunity to position themselves for a better future.