

ICE raids on homes panic schools, politicians

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SFGate.com

Wednesday, May 7, 2008



(05-06) 19:24 PDT Oakland -- Immigration arrests at homes in Berkeley and Oakland on Tuesday sent a wave of panic among parents in both cities, as authorities mistakenly believed immigration agents were raiding schools.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers were in both cities Tuesday, performing routine fugitive operations, spokeswoman Virginia Kice said. Teams go out virtually every day looking for specific "immigration fugitives," she said.

Officers arrested four family members at a Berkeley home and a woman at an Oakland residence. They were not at schools.

Yet, within the next few hours, rumors of raids circulated throughout the communities.

In Berkeley, school district Superintendent Bill Huyet sent out an automated phone message to all parents notifying them that a Latino family had been picked up and assuring them that the district would "not allow any child to be taken away from the school."

In Oakland, Mayor Ron Dellums and three school board members converged at the end of the school day on Stonehurst Elementary School along with immigration rights advocates, saying they believed ICE agents "would return."

"In my view, that is the ugly side of government," Dellums said. "No way children should ever be treated to that kind of harassment and fear."

He said police officers will be posted at the campus Wednesday to ensure that federal immigration officials don't come onto school grounds. He added that federal officials have assured him they will not be at schools.

Initially, Oakland district officials said federal agents were at Stonehurst and denied entry by school staff. By late afternoon, they rescinded that, saying that an ICE vehicle was seen nearby. Berkeley officials also said no agents were at local schools.

Still, state Sen. Don Perata, D-Oakland, got involved.

"There should be an immediate freeze on ICE raids directed at schoolchildren while legislation aiming to fix immigration is considered," he said in a statement.

Later, immigration advocates said they believed ICE vans were circling schools and intimidating the community, noting that ICE officers accompanied a mother onto an Oakland school campus in December before questioning her in a workplace investigation.

Kice said Tuesday's rumors took on a life of their own.

In most cases, ICE fugitive operations take place at residences or sometimes at places of employment, she said. "A school is not a place we would routinely conduct an enforcement operation for a variety of reasons," Kice said.

The fear across the communities, however, was real.

"People are terrified," said Berkeley Unified spokesman Mark Coplan. "There is a lot of speculation."

Larry Bensky's fifth-grade daughter came home from Berkeley's LeConte Elementary School on Tuesday saying she had no homework because it was "ICE week," which meant "they" were going after the families of the Latino children.

"She doesn't know what ICE is," Bensky said. "She doesn't know what targeted is. You can imagine it's very disturbing for children that from one day to the next that a child they sit next to could be kidnapped, arrested and deported."