

# 'This is what democracy looks like': 5th-graders protest immigration policy

[bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/12/10/this-what-democracy-looks-like-graders-protest-immigration-policy/Z1P2d80MA5Vx1EYr5FEza0/story.html](https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/12/10/this-what-democracy-looks-like-graders-protest-immigration-policy/Z1P2d80MA5Vx1EYr5FEza0/story.html)  
Cristela Guerra - Reporter



The fifth-grader paused over his poster board, marker in hand, then turned to his friends. "How do you spell 'illegal?'"

The boy was among the children making protest signs on Sunday morning at the Boston Workmen's Circle Center for Jewish Culture & Social Justice Sunday School in Brookline.

When finished, his sign read "No human is illegal." A girl in the group wrote one that said "No deportation" in pink. She filled the first "N" with sad faces.

And the class of 10- and 11-year-olds learned the meaning of a new word that day: solidarity.

For more than 20 years, the Jewish cultural organization has taught students about the history of Jews in the labor movement. The fifth-graders then organize a protest around an issue of social justice. This year, for three months, they focused on immigration.

“They’re like sponges,” said fifth-grade teacher Mirah Sand. “They hear what’s going on. It’s a really valuable place for them to get informed and have the skills and language to organize.”

Students ate pizza for lunch before parents drove them to the Suffolk County House of Correction in South Bay, which houses a detention center run by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The kids led a long line of more than 100 supporters, along with a brass marching band, to the front doors of the building on Bradston Street while singing “This Little Light of Mine.”

Joined by representatives from the coalition Jobs with Justice and from Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ, the group of fifth-graders demanded the release of two undocumented individuals who were detained after their regular check-ins with ICE in the last six months.

“Show me what democracy looks like,” the kids chanted over a megaphone.



*Pat Greenhouse/Globe Staff*

“This is what democracy looks like,” responded the crowd.

Joined by representatives from the coalition Jobs with Justice and from Service Employees International Union Local 32BJ, the group demanded the release of two undocumented individuals who were detained after their regular check-ins with ICE in the last six months: Francisco Rodriguez, a former janitor at MIT, who has been in detention since July, and Siham Byah, a local activist from Morocco who was detained in early November.

Students gathered signatures on letters to send to Governor Charlie Baker supporting the Safe Communities Act, a bill that would limit police cooperation with federal immigration authorities.

“I believe that deportation is very unfair,” said Ely Setiya, 11, of Brookline. “I would feel horrible if I was separated from my own family.”

Inside the building and above the crowd, men banged on barred windows and waved at the people on the street below. One held a sign with two words: “Free us.”

“I wanted to do this because I want to make a change in the world,” said David Seniuk, 10. “I want to help as many people as possible. I think is a good way to start.”

Pamela Wine proudly took video of her daughter, Xela, during the action.

“Helping kids learn this young is going to make the world a much better place,” Wine said.

Xela was nervous that someone inside the correctional facility would get mad.

Then she looked up at the faces behind bars.

“Seeing the people in the windows,” the fifth-grader said. “[They] know we’re there for them.”

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