

# Si Se Puede

**This text is a summary of events leading up to the massive walkout of students in response to legislation that would criminalize immigrants.**

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In response to legislation that would have criminalized immigrants, thousands of high school students from across the country walked out of their classrooms and into history. The movement started organically in California, as word spread through mass e-mails, cell phones, pagers and social networking sites like Myspace.com.

In cities like Los Angeles, Salinas, Fresno and San Diego, high school students learned of the anti-immigrant bill H.R. 4437. The legislation criminalizes undocumented immigrants, promising jail time and a swift removal of undocumented workers from the U.S. It also criminalizes those who would help immigrants seek a better life—like employers, churches and community leaders. Described as “the most repressive immigration bill in 70 years,” major provisions would deny the enormous presence and contributions of immigrants throughout the country.

That fact was not lost on the country’s large number of Latino high school students. They felt their fate, as well as that of parents and grandparents, was in the hands of legislators who knew nothing of their struggle. Despite school lockdowns and threats from administrators who’d caught wind of the plan, tens of thousands of students walked out of class over several days last March to stand up for something they deemed, at that moment, much more important.

“I’ve always been proud to say that I’m Hispanic,” Marshall High School student Rafael Tabares, 17, told the Los Angeles Times. “But on Saturday I thought: Whoa. We can do something. And we can do it right.”

The walkouts followed a weekend of enormous rallies in major U.S. cities—by people of all ages and nationalities—including one in Los Angeles with a crowd estimate as high as one million people.

The mass protests may have started in Los Angeles, but they quickly spread to cities in other states, like Phoenix, Las Vegas, Dallas, Houston, Chicago and New York. Students marched for miles, collecting students from more schools as they walked, before finally convening en masse at city halls and other public spaces. Some chanted “Sí se puede,” or “Yes we can,” and “We’re not criminals.” Some held signs and flags representing their countries of origin. Others refused, saying the flags would make the walkouts appear nationalist rather than American.

The walkouts were a powerful visual reminder that there are more than 37 million Latinos in the United States, and that the legislation, which later stalled in the Senate, was unrealistic.

“We all want to stay here. We all want to get a good education,” Los Angeles student Francisco Velazquez told a local TV station.

“My parents are breaking their backs just to keep food on the table,” said Austin, Texas, student Edgar Gonzalez, a child of Mexican immigrants. The bill, he says, dishonors the contributions immigrants make to society.

A DC-area student told reporters that immigrants improve everyone's quality of life. "We work at fast food restaurants. We paint houses. We mow lawns," said 16-year-old Ephram Lopez, a sophomore at Stuart High School in Falls Church, Va.

Schools instituted bans to prevent students from walking out during the nearly week-long demonstration. They issued unexcused absences and truancy reports. Police presence was high during the walkouts, with authorities cracking down on disorderly conduct and curfew violations.

Yet some educators used the social justice movement as an opportunity, encouraging students to write their legislators.

"I don't condone it ... but the best thing we can do is make it a teaching experience," said Sidney Lanier High principal Richard Solis of San Antonio. Schools with predominately Latino populations were particularly affected.

"All the Mexicans in this school, we'd all have to see our grandparents go back. And that's just wrong," one of Solis' students told local news reporters.

Not all who participated in the walkouts were Latino. African Americans and Asian Americans joined the walkouts, as well.

"Half my friends came here a few years ago. ... People have forgotten the meaning of America," said Raeshwan Greene, a senior at Wakefield High School in Fairfax, Va., which is nearly half Latino, according to The Washington Post.

To many involved, the walkouts were a great success.

"It got the word out that we're not going to be quiet," Christian Dorn, 16, told the newspaper. "It's similar to what the African Americans did in the 1960s. ... We shouldn't be treated like criminals."