



## IMMIGRATION DEBATE INFLAMES STUDENTS AND LAWMAKERS

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*High school students are joining the debate over immigration being fought in Congress and courtrooms around the country.*

Thousands of students in cities as far flung as Los Angeles, San Diego, Houston and the suburbs of Washington, D.C. walked out of classes last week to protest possible new laws that would crack down on illegal immigration.

Word of the impromptu demonstrations spread by text messages, cell phones, Internet postings and word-of-mouth.

### **Why students are protesting**

Many of the protesting students have parents who came to this country illegally and worry that the proposed laws would break up their families.

"We're fighting for our parents and their rights 'cause they fight for us," Jessica Montufar, 17, whose parents emigrated from Guatemala 20 years ago, told the Washington Post.

Some said they were inspired by a recent HBO film "Walkout," which showed 20,000 Los Angeles students protesting inequalities in the public school system in 1968, the LA Times reported.

While school administrators and city leaders urged students to remain in school -- with some threatening suspensions -- students said they felt empowered by the experience.

"Sometimes you have to stand up for what you believe in," Mariela Muniz, 15, a student organizer in California, told the LA Times. "We did. And it worked."

### **Debate in Congress over two different Americas**

The United States has always been a nation of immigrants. Currently, there are 33 million foreign-born residents -- the largest number since the Census Bureau started keeping such statistics in 1850, the New York Times reported.

What concerns lawmakers are the estimated 11 million illegal immigrants who entered the country without permission and remain undocumented.

In December, the House of Representatives passed a strict immigration reform bill that makes living in the United States without documents a criminal offense, proposes building fences along U.S. borders and imposes harsh penalties on those who hire or help illegal immigrants.

Lawmakers who support this bill see illegal immigrants as lawbreakers who threaten national security and take jobs away from Americans.

"For years, the government has turned a blind eye to illegal immigrants who break into this country," Republican Representative Tom Tancredo of Colorado told the New York Times.

"It isn't any wonder that illegal aliens now act as if they are entitled to the rights and privileges of citizenship."

Lawmakers in favor of a proposal introduced in the Senate offer a different point of view -- that of illegal immigrants performing jobs many Americans refuse to do and providing a new pool of potential voters.

"Are we going to continue a rich tradition of hundreds of years of welcoming new blood and new vitality to our nation, or are we going to adopt a protectionist, isolationist attitude and policies that are in betrayal of the very fundamentals of this great nation of ours, a beacon of hope, and liberty, and freedom throughout the world?" Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona said.

The bill, which has yet to be debated by the full Senate, would strengthen border enforcement, regulate the flow of "guest workers," and create solutions to legalize some immigrants already living and working in this country.

Not all senators agree with the proposed legislation, however.

"I don't think we should legislate a track that gives a privileged status to people who broke the law," Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, who has introduced a different immigration bill with security as its central element, told CNN.

### **President Bush's perspective**

President Bush favors a comprehensive bill that protects border security and creates a guest worker program.

"And by 'comprehensive,' I mean not only a bill that has border security in it," Mr. Bush said, "but a bill that has a worker permit program in it. That's an important part of having a border that works."

The Senate is expected to vote on an immigration bill by mid-April.

Senators will then have to negotiate with House members to come up with a bill that both chambers of Congress can agree upon.

*--Compiled by Annie Schleicher*

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