

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Columbia Heights Public Schools Speaks Out About ICE Presence in Minnesota

COLUMBIA HEIGHTS, Minn., Jan. 21, 2026 – Columbia Heights Public Schools (CHPS) held a press conference on Wednesday, January 21, 2026, at Valley View Elementary School to speak about the impact on the school district of the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents in Minnesota. The speakers were Columbia Heights Public Schools (CHPS) Superintendent Zena Stenvik, CHPS Board of Education Chair Mary Granlund, Immigration Lawyer for the family Marc Prokosch and PreK 4 teacher Ella Sullivan. Valley View Principal Jason Kuhlman and Columbia Academy Principal Leslee Sherk were also present.

During the press conference, Superintendent Stenvik shared this information about the recent activity of ICE in Columbia Heights and how it has directly impacted the school community:

As of today, four of our students, our children, have been detained by ICE. Just yesterday, January 20th, 2026, two of our students were taken by ICE agents. On the way to school, a 17-year-old high school student, a minor, was taken by armed and masked agents, alone. No parents were present. The student was removed from their car and taken away. Then, in the afternoon, Liam Conejo Ramos, a 5-year-old child, was apprehended with his father while in their driveway, just having arrived home from this Preschool classroom. Another adult living in the home was outside and begged the agents to let them take care of the small child, but was refused. Instead, the agent took the child out of the still-running vehicle, led him to the door, and directed him to knock on the door, asking to be let in, in order to see if anyone else was home- essentially using a 5-year-old as bait. Twenty minutes after Liam and his father were taken, the middle school brother came home to a missing dad, a missing little brother, and a terrified mother. Columbia Academy Principal Leslee Sherk and Valley View Elementary Principal Jason Kuhlman were also at the house to provide support to the family. This family is following US legal parameters and has an active asylum case with no order of deportation. I have viewed the legal paperwork with my own eyes. Why detain a 5-year-old? You cannot tell me that this child is going to be classified as a violent criminal.

Two weeks ago, a 10-year-old 4th-grade child was taken by ICE agents on her way to one of our elementary schools with her mother. During the arrest, the child called her father to tell him the ICE agents were bringing her to school. The father immediately came to the school to find that both his daughter and wife had been taken. By the end of the school day, they were already in a detention center in Texas, and they are **still** there.

Last week, ICE agents pushed their way into an apartment and detained a 17-year-old Columbia Heights High School student and her mother. Just 2 hours ago, an ICE vehicle drove onto school property and came up to our high school loading dock, with no business being there. They were told to leave by the high school administration. So, ICE agents have been roaming our neighborhoods, circling our schools, following our buses, coming into our parking lots and taking our kids. The sense of safety in our community and around our schools is shaken and our hearts are shattered.

Superintendent Stenvik also shared that the pervasive ICE activity in the Columbia Heights Public School community is inducing trauma and is taking a toll on the children, families, staff and community members, and has changed nearly everything about daily life. “Staff wear brave faces throughout the day for their students, while facing so many uncertainties. As soon as the school day ends, they are not sure if they will see their students tomorrow morning while taking attendance.”

OUR MISSION

Columbia Heights Public Schools
Creating worlds of opportunity for each and every learner
“All Belong, All Succeed”

Board of Education Chair Mary Granlund spoke about how CHPS's mission is to "Create Worlds of Opportunity for Each and Every Learner. Where all belong, and all succeed," stressing the importance that all truly means everyone. She also thanked the Columbia Heights School District community and staff for the extra time and energy they are dedicating to impacted students and their families. "We are lucky to live in a place where the community has wrapped its collective arms around our neighbors. From elected officials to clergy, to teachers, to community members. Who keeps us safe? We keep us safe."

Columbia Heights Public Schools' top priority is the safety and well-being of CHPS students. Board Chair Mary Granlund finished out the press statement with the following. "Our children should not be afraid to come to school or wait at the bus stop. Their families should not be afraid to drop off or pick up their children from school. We learned the importance of in-person learning following the pandemic. Schools and communities must be safe places for children and families to thrive. Please help us and other schools to again be a safe place where all belong and all succeed."

Reporters who were present then had time to ask questions about what changes the district has seen with attendance, specific questions about Liam and his father, online learning options (which are available to CHPS students), and what schools and staff are doing to help students understand what is happening in the community. Valley View PreK 4 teacher, Ella, shared that this experience has been a shock, and that "Liam is a bright young student. He is so kind and loving, and his classmates miss him. He comes into class every day and just brightens the room. All I want is for him to be back here and safe."

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