

Monday
June 20, 2016



\$1.50

Austin American-Statesman

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Many Austin students can identify with ‘undocumented’ valedictorian

LOCAL

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Posted: 12:00 a.m. Sunday, June 19, 2016

Highlights

Austin school district provided DREAM Act assistance to 5,053 students or former students in one year.

School officials estimate several local unauthorized students graduate at the top of their class annually.

Of the nearly 84,000 students in the Austin school district, there are 2,453 students who are immigrants.

Crockett High School valedictorian Mayte Lara drew [national attention this month with a single tweet](#) in which she disclosed that she is “undocumented” and headed to the University of Texas with her tuition fully covered with scholarships and grants. But what the spotlight on her didn’t show is there are dozens of Central Texas students from the Class of 2016 in virtually the same situation.

Like Lara, Mario Gutierrez, who graduated third in his class at Del Valle High School, also isn’t a citizen and has received permission from the federal government to complete his education in the U.S. and work here without fear of deportation. He leaves in two months for Harvard, with school fully paid. Vanessa Rodriguez, the salutatorian at Elgin High, also will attend UT. And Mizraim Belman, who graduated among the top 10 students at Crockett High, will attend Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., on a full scholarship.

In interviews with the American-Statesman, all four said they immigrated to the U.S. at very young ages and were driven to succeed by their desire not to squander the opportunity that living here has provided to them. They are aware that their lives are caught within a national immigration debate with little middle ground.

Their supporters praise them as examples of the American Dream. Their critics accuse them of stealing benefits from the American system without paying taxes and of getting their free education at the expense of children who are here legally

The teens also know their protected status could be in jeopardy, depending on how the presidential election goes.



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Crockett High School valedictorian Mayte Lara drew national attention this month in a single tweet when she disclosed she was “undocumented.”

All four have received Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA, status, which allows certain young people who came to the United States as children to work and study in the U.S. legally. The policy shift has

helped spur a whole generation of high-performing students who grew up without a clear path to citizenship or permanent residency in the U.S.

“There is more to us,” said Belman, 17, who arrived in the U.S. when he was 4 years old. “People think we just crossed the border to take advantage of their resources. First of all, we don’t have access to all resources. The reality is most of those services and opportunities have citizenship requirements so we can’t receive them. Second, many are fleeing horrible situations, violence and poor educational systems. The reality is most people cannot legally immigrate.”

“I’m very concerned,” said Lara, 17, who plans to pursue a career in a STEM field (science, technology, engineering and math). “Thousands of people found relief through DACA and can now work and get a higher education, and contribute to society. I hope whoever wins (the presidential race) doesn’t take that away from us.”



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Mizraim Belman, left, who graduated among the top 10 students at Crockett High, Vanessa Rodriguez, the salutatorian at Elgin High, Mayte ... [Read More](#)

On the same day Lara tweeted about her accomplishments and immigration status, Larissa Martinez, a valedictorian from McKinney Boyd High School, outside of Dallas, announced she is an

unauthorized immigrant during her commencement speech. She will be attending Yale on a full scholarship.

The Austin school district has made a point of showing support for students whether or not they are citizens or legal residents.

“It’s been my experience that there are many cases like Mayte where first-generation students are achieving at high levels because their parents sacrificed so much to get here that they really push their children,” Austin school Trustee Gina Hinojosa said.

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- [Watch: Meet Mayte Lara, the girl behind the tweet](#)
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School districts don’t ask about residency status, so it’s unclear exactly how many of the Austin area’s students are in the country without authorization. But some school officials estimate that each year several Central Texas students who entered the country without authorization graduate at the top of their class. At Travis High School, for example, district Trustee Paul Saldaña said he learned three valedictorians in the past six years were from families staying in this country without legal permission.

Carlos González Gutiérrez, Mexico’s general consul in Austin, estimates about 35 percent of the 140 students awarded a [new scholarship created for Latinos and immigrants](#) aren’t authorized to be in the U.S.

Of the nearly 84,000 students in the Austin school district, there are 387 high school, 396 middle school and 1,670 elementary school students who are immigrants, though the district doesn’t track whether they have legal residency or not.

The district’s student services provided DREAM Act assistance to 5,053 students or former students from June 18, 2012, to August 26, 2013, the most recent year available. The DREAM, or Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors, legislation would provide a path toward legal status to immigrants who came to the U.S. without legal authorization as children, if they attend college or serve in the military.

“For 10 years before I got DACA, I was in a state of uncertainty, however, I worked hard and didn’t let my lack of legal status keep me back,” said Rodriguez, 17, who came to the U.S. with her family in 2004. “Same goes with the future. I will still continue to pursue an education.”