Largely ignored in the immigration debate are the 1.8 million children who make up approximately 15 percent of the undocumented immigrant population. Many of these children are brought to the U.S. at a young age, are educated in American schools, and grow up speaking English and embracing American culture. Often these children—who include class valedictorians, honor students, star athletes, and everyday kids—are completely unaware of their immigration status. An estimated 65,000 undocumented youth graduate from American high schools every year. All are students who, if given the chance, could become our much-needed teachers, nurses, and community leaders. Instead, these students are left unable to fulfill their dreams of attending college or pursuing the career of their choice.

HIGHER EDUCATION BARRIERS

In 1982, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that states could not violate the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution by denying undocumented immigrant children access to a free public K-12 education (Plyer v. Doe). While the Plyer ruling acknowledged that restricting educational access to undocumented children would result in the creation of a permanent “underclass,” the ruling did not address access to higher education.

Undocumented youth face significant barriers to higher education, such as lack of access to state and federal financial aid, including loans and work-study options. In addition, they cannot apply for most private scholarships, which are typically limited to citizens and legal permanent residents, and are unable to work legally and pay for tuition and related expenses on their own. In a majority of states, these students are also ineligible for in-state tuition rates due to federal immigration policy that penalizes states that provide in-state tuition without regard to immigration status, creating additional financial hardship as many of these students come from low-income families. Due to the limited opportunities awaiting these students beyond high school, many choose to drop out. In fact, immigrant students make up nearly 30 percent of the U.S. dropout population. For undocumented students who do graduate from high school, generous estimates indicate that only 14 percent are enrolled in college.

Due to inaction at the federal level, ten states have taken steps to remove higher education barriers that face immigrants residing in their state. In 2001, Texas was the first state to pass a law that would allow individuals, regardless of immigration status, to qualify for in-state tuition if they have graduated from a Texas high school and have lived in the state for three years. Since then, California, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Utah, and Washington have followed Texas’s lead. However, students who complete college in these states still face barriers to employment in the U.S. upon graduation due to their undocumented status.

PRESERVING TALENT FOR A PROSPEROUS FUTURE

In addition to facing an uncertain future in the U.S., undocumented students also constantly live in fear of deportation to a country they no longer remember, where they may not speak the language, or have no family ties. After already investing in the K-12 education of motivated students like Walter Lara, it is in our national best interest to maximize on this human capital by providing these students with the opportunity to explore their full potential and ultimately give back to the country they already consider home. First Focus strongly supports amending current immigration policy to provide access to higher education and a pathway to citizenship for undocumented students.