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No. 26-CV-00190-KMM-DJF (D. Minn.)

Amicus Curiae Brief of the Advocates for Human Rights

Exhibit No. 16

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ICE detains 5-year-old Minnesota boy; school leader says agents used him as 'bait'

Liam Conejo Ramos, a student at Valley View Elementary, whom school officials and a lawyer for the Ramos family say was detained with his parent by federal agents on Tuesday. Courtesy of Columbia Heights Public Schools

Listen ICE detains 5-year-old Minnesota boy; school leader says agents used him as 'bait' Save SHARE

The Columbia Heights Public School district says federal agents have detained four of its students in four separate incidents over the last two weeks. One child is a 5-year-old boy who attends a district elementary school and was used as "bait" to draw family members out of their home.

"Why detain a 5-year-old? You can't tell me that this child is going to be classified as a violent criminal," Zena Stenvik, the Columbia Heights superintendent, told reporters Wednesday.

According to Stenvik, masked agents apprehended 5-year-old Liam Conejo Ramos in his driveway on Tuesday as he returned home from school with his father.

"Another adult living in the home was outside and begged the agents to let him take care of the small child, and was refused," Stenvik said.

"Instead," she said, "the agent took the child out of the still-running car, 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."

Agents later took the father and child away in a vehicle and sent them to Texas.

Stenvik said Liam's family has an "active asylum case" with no deportation orders.

"I have viewed the legal paperwork with my own eyes," Stenvik said, adding that leaders from Liam's school visited his home on Tuesday after he was detained to provide support to his family, including a middle school student in the district who returned home to find out his father and brother had been taken.

Liam Conejo Ramos, a student at Valley View Elementary. Courtesy of Columbia Heights Public Schools

Marc Prokosch, who is a lawyer representing Ramos' family, said he is still not sure of the exact current whereabouts of Liam and his dad. He believes, based on the experience of other clients he has worked with, that they are currently in Texas in a family holding cell.

"Every step of their immigration process has been doing what they've been asked to do, and so this is just … cruelty," Prokosch said, noting that Ramos' family is currently going through an asylum application process.

"I'm exploring whether we file a habeas corpus petition to get him out, we'd have to actually file that down in Texas now," Prokosch added.

Asked if the 5-year-old's detainment was illegal, Prokosch said, "Probably not, and that's what's going to make my job really difficult. Just because something is legal doesn't mean it's moral. You know, yes, they may have the legal authority to detain a 5-year-old, but why?"

Liam's teacher Ella Sullivan was in visible tears during the announcement that Liam had been taken away. "He's a bright young student, and he's so kind and loving, and his classmates miss him, and all I want is for him to be safe and back here," Sullivan said

'Our hearts are shattered'

According to Columbia Heights district officials, three other students, all under the age of 18 have been detained by federal agents in recent weeks.

One, a 10-year old student who is in fourth grade at a Columbia Heights elementary school, was apprehended with her mother while on her way to class.

"During the arrest, the child called her father on the phone to tell him that 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," Stenvik said. "By the end of the school day, they were already in a detention center in Texas, and they are still there."

According to Stenvik, another student was "taken by ICE on the way to school" on Tuesday Jan. 20.

Last week a 17-year-old student in the district was detained when, as Stenvik said, "ICE agents pushed their way into an apartment."

"ICE agents have been roaming our neighborhoods, circling our schools, following our buses, coming into our parking lots and taking our children," Stenvik added. "The sense of safety in our community and around our schools is shaken and our hearts are shattered."

School absences climbing

Stenvik said nearly a third of students in her district have stayed home in recent weeks out of fear.

"This surge has changed nearly everything about our daily lives," Stenvik said. "Students are watching abductions on their way to school, on their way home and through their windows.

"Imagine the trauma of a child being picked up by masked and armed agents, seeing their parents in handcuffs and being used to attempt to lure their mother out of the house and into danger. What has become of our country?"

Liam Conejo Ramos, a student at Valley View Elementary, whom school officials and a lawyer for the Ramos family say was detained with his parent by federal agents on Tuesday. Courtesy of Columbia Heights Public Schools

Several other Twin Cities school districts have told MPR News they are seeing student absenteeism rates between 20 and 40 percent in the last two weeks.

The Minneapolis and St. Paul districts have canceled classes this week and last for several days to allow teachers to prepare to transition large numbers of students to virtual learning. Several other school districts in the Twin Cities say they've seen a surge in students requesting virtual learning options.

The Department of Homeland Security had not yet responded to MPR News inquiries about Ramos by the time this story was set to publish.