

# Reading Group Questions for

## *We ARE Americans*

### Book Summary

Twenty-six years ago, the Supreme Court affirmed undocumented students' right to a public education in the Plyer v. Doe (1982) decision. The decision applies to elementary and secondary schooling—thus safeguarding education only through high school. This leaves the students who yearn to further their education with very few options for achieving a college degree.

Through the inspiring stories of sixteen students – from seniors in high school to graduate students – *We ARE Americans* gives voice to the estimated 2.4 million undocumented students in the United States. These stories reveal how, despite financial hardship and the unpredictability of living with the daily threat of deportation—and often in the face of discrimination by their teachers—many of these students are not just persisting in the American educational system, but excelling. Not only do they shine academically, they are also often participating in local community service projects. This collection of narratives reveals what drives these young people and the visions they have for contributing to the country they call home.

*We ARE Americans* draws attention to these students' predicaments, stimulating debate about putting right a wrong not of their making and motivating more people to call for legislation, such as the stalled DREAM Act, that would offer undocumented students who participate in the economy and civil life a path to citizenship.

## Questions for Discussion

**Q.** The topic of immigration is without doubt very controversial in the United States. Why do you think immigration is such a charged topic? What are seen as the pros and cons of immigration?

**Q.** Do you feel undocumented students are a potential economic asset instead of a drain on the economy? Why or why not?

**Q.** Despite the actual facts about undocumented immigrants helping the economy, the stereotypes about immigrants as “lawbreakers” or “abusers of social services” seem to linger. Why do you think this happens? How do think these stereotypes affect undocumented students?

**Q.** Were your perceptions of undocumented students transformed or reinforced by this book? Have your notions about what it means to be “American” changed since reading the book? What makes someone “American”?

**Q.** Do you feel that the undocumented students described in this book are as American as students born in this country? Why or why not?

**Q.** Did you identify with or have a strong emotional reaction to any of the personal narratives presented in this book? Did any of the narratives make you happy, sad, angry, or disappointed? If so, which one(s)?

**Q.** Lack of federal financial aid is one of the greatest barriers undocumented students face in gaining access to higher education. Why does our society and government resist rectifying this situation? Do you think there are solutions?

**Q.** The personal narratives in this book highlight the high levels of civic engagement undocumented students participate in during their educational careers. Do you think the contributions undocumented students make should entitle them to a path toward legalization? Why or why not?

**Q.** The stories of the formerly undocumented students that conclude the book show that legalization is enabling them to make a positive contribution to society and their local communities. Do you believe that legalization of such students will result in a net benefit to society?

**Q.** Do you think schools (K-12 & universities) should play a role in helping undocumented students achieve success? If so, what role should schools play?

**Q.** Are you convinced by the argument that the constitution provides basic rights and guarantees to every young adult, even if they came to this country without legal authorization? Why or why not? These principles were used in the arguments which won primary and secondary education for undocumented children. What, then, are the arguments for and against giving them citizenship? Or access to funding for higher education?

**Q.** Do you think the United States needs to rethink current immigration policies to be more inclusive? Does the U.S. government need to pass legislation for more comprehensive immigration reform? Why or why not?

**Q.** On bottom of page 91 Lucia says:

“I wasn’t asked to be brought here. I didn’t choose to come here. I didn’t ask for my situation. I feel like it’s a punishment. I did everything I was told to do. I stayed out of trouble. I stayed out of gangs. I didn’t get pregnant at sixteen. I’m a great member of society. I know more of civic

duty than most naturalized or U.S.-born citizens. I know more about politics than most U.S. citizens. So why am I being punished?"

How does this make you feel, as an "American"? As a person? What would you do in Lucia's place?

**Q.** In many of the student narratives, individuals play an important part in either getting the student started or facilitating their further path: Lilia's teacher p 27; Paulina's family p 54; Lucia's teachers and employer p 89; Jessica's counselor p 117. What are people doing to help the undocumented students in your schools? What would you be willing to do?

**Q.** Percy says "immigrants do socially important work"—in fact, our economy depends on them. We cannot expect these workers—who are important links in our economic chain—to not want to be with their families. So how do we deal, as a country, with this catch 22? Would you be willing to keep out all of the workers and pay more for many goods and services? Or acknowledge the part they play and thus educate and legalize their children?

**Q.** On March 26, 2009 the DREAM Act was reintroduced in Congress. If passed it would allow a path to legalization for undocumented students who graduate from high school and continue on to college or serve in the military. Do you think the stories profiled in this book would compel most Americans to contact their Congressional representatives to encourage them to vote for the DREAM Act? Why or why not? Do the stories compel you to contact your congressional representative in support of the DREAM Act?