Assessing—and Interrupting—Intolerance at School

By Maureen Costello and Coshandra Dillard

Three years ago—during and immediately after the presidential campaign—we documented a surge of incidents involving racial slurs and symbols, bigotry, and the harassment of minority children in the nation's schools. We called this phenomenon the "Trump Effect," because it appeared that children were emulating the racist, xenophobic, and coarse language Donald Trump was using on the campaign trail.

Indeed, teachers told us in two informal surveys that in many cases Trump's name was invoked, or his words parroted, by children who were harassing others based on their race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. They noted a disturbing uptick in incidents involving swastikas, derogatory language, Nazi salutes, and Confederate flags. Teachers reported that children of color were worried for the safety of themselves and their families.

Now, reports of hate and bias in school emerge regularly in the news media. Captured by cell phone cameras or described on social media, disturbing incidents—slurs, graffiti, swastikas, or chants of "Build the wall!" aimed at Latinx athletes—travel swiftly from schools to the front page.

In recent months, several such stories have caught the attention of audiences nationwide. In Baraboo, Wisconsin, dozens of male high school students, almost all white, were seen giving a Nazi salute in a prom photo. In Idaho, elementary school staff dressed up as Mexicans and Trump's wall on Halloween. At an elite private school in New York City, a video went viral showing two sixth-grade girls wearing blackface and swinging their arms around like apes. There have been numerous stories about African American or Latinx athletes being taunted by white students.

The reality is that while these media reports pop up with alarming regularity, they represent just a tiny fraction of the hate and bias incidents that educators are encountering in the classroom.

In our recent report, *Hate at School*, from which this article is excerpted, we identified 821 school-based incidents that were reported in the media in 2018. By comparison, the K–12 educators who responded to a new questionnaire reported 3,265 such incidents in the fall of 2018 alone. We found that:

- More than two-thirds of the 2,776 educators who responded to the questionnaire witnessed a hate or bias incident in their school during the fall of 2018.
- Fewer than 5 percent of the incidents witnessed by educators were reported in the news media.

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- Racism appears to be the motivation behind most hate and bias incidents in school, accounting for 63 percent of incidents reported in the news and 33 percent of incidents reported by teachers.
- Of the incidents reported by educators, those involving racism and anti-Semitism were the most likely to be reported in the news media; anti-Latinx and anti-LGBTQ incidents were the least likely.
- Most of the hate and bias incidents witnessed by educators were not addressed by school leaders. No one was disciplined in 57 percent of them. Nine times out of 10, administrators failed to denounce the bias or reaffirm school values.

The picture that emerges is the exact opposite of what schools should be: places where students feel welcome, safe, and supported by the adults who are responsible for their well-being.

But schools are not hermetically sealed institutions. They are not immune from the political and socioeconomic forces gripping our nation.

In fact, this outbreak of aggression aimed primarily at students of color and LGBTQ children reflects what is happening outside school walls.

Hate crimes are rising. The president himself engages in childish taunting on social media and is shattering the norms of behavior observed by generations of American leaders. And the racism, bigotry, and misogyny of a virulent white nationalist movement are being parroted by mainstream political and media figures.

Schools cannot simply ignore these problems.

To ensure students are safe from harm, educators must take vigorous, proactive measures to counter prejudice and to promote equity and inclusiveness. And they must act swiftly and decisively to address all incidents of hate and bias when they happen, with a model that emphasizes communication, empathy, reconciliation, and support to those who are harmed.

How Bias at School Affects Students

We've long known that discrimination has measurable, adverse effects on the health of those who are targeted. Researchers first connected racism to hypertension in African American subjects in the 1990s.[1] And there's no shortage of studies on the effects of discrimination on young people's health in the years since. We know that when students are targeted for their sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, race, ethnicity, or other identities, their mental and physical health suffer.[2] These students are more likely to report symptoms of stress, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), risk-taking activities, school avoidance, and more.[3] Recent research suggests that racial-ethnic discrimination can cause behavioral problems for children as young as 7.[4]

These effects vary based on whether the bias comes from school personnel, peers, or others.[5] Students bullied by peers deal with both physical and emotional fallout that can follow them throughout their lives.[6] Studies show the damage is compounded when the bullying is based on one of their identities.[7] And when students are targeted for more than one of their identities (e.g., race and disability), they are even more likely to report negative effects.[8]

Discrimination and biases from educators also have long-lasting effects. "Children who experience discrimination from their teachers are more likely to have negative attitudes about school and lower academic motivation and performance, and are at increased risk of dropping out of high school," reports the Migration Policy Institute. "In fact, experiences of teacher discrimination shape children's attitudes about their academic abilities above and beyond their past academic performance. Even when controlling for their actual performance, children who experience discrimination from teachers feel worse about their academic abilities and are less likely to feel they belong at school, when compared against students who do not experience discrimination."[9]

But the harm of a toxic school culture, where students are singled out for hate and bias based on their identity, isn't limited to students who are targeted. The authors of a 2018 study published in *JAMA Pediatrics* surveyed just over 2,500 Los Angeles students and asked them to report their concerns about "increasing hostility and discrimination of people because of their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation/identity, immigrant status, religion, or disability status in society." They found that the more concern or stress students reported feeling, the more likely they were to also report symptoms of depression and ADHD, along with drug, tobacco, or alcohol use. Unfortunately, it appears student anxiety may be rising: In 2016, about 30 percent of surveyed students reported feeling "very or extremely worried" about hate and bias. By 2017, that figure had jumped to nearly 35 percent.[10]

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The Hierarchy of Hate in School

Whether looking at news media reports or reading educator stories, it's clear that hate and bias are national, not regional, issues. We saw both media and educator reports from all 50 states and Washington, D.C., in 2018.

Within schools, hate and bias aren't limited to one location in a building. Most of the incidents that educators reported took place on school grounds, with nearly a third happening inside the classroom, presumably in full view of teachers. Few educators see hate and bias incidents on social media, but social media—videos, posts, chats, and screenshots—are often at the center of the stories that get reported on the news.

Most incidents of hate and bias happen at the secondary level, in middle and high school. In elementary school, students tend to stay with the same group, often in the same classroom, and work closely with a small number of adults. Most elementary schools emphasize socialization and learning to get along. In secondary schools, adolescents are trying out new identities, changing classes and teachers, and vying for attention and peer approval. They are also more active online, where ugly content gets amplified and it's easy to fall into a cesspool of hate.

In our study, we catalogued the types of bias incidents reported by teachers. We found that racial and ethnic bias were the most

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common, followed by incidents motivated by bias against the LGBTQ community, immigrants, Jews, Muslims, and "other."

Race and Ethnicity

Racial bias—of all sorts—is the most common driver of incidents, making up 33 percent of the number reported by educators and 63 percent of those reported in the news media. Black students are the ones targeted in an overwhelming percentage of these incidents, though Asian students are also singled out. Teachers also reported a handful of incidents involving name-calling directed at white people. Racist incidents, often involving slurs, also dominate the news reports.

Administrators appear to be sensitive to racist incidents and, compared to other episodes of hate and bias, are more likely to take them seriously. These episodes are also more likely to result in disciplinary action. According to educators, in 59 percent of racial incidents they saw, someone was disciplined. And administrators are more likely to communicate with families, staff, and students when race is involved; in 35 percent of cases reported by educators, school leaders denounced the act and reaffirmed the school's values. In 25 percent of the incidents, school leaders provided support of some kind to the targeted groups.

Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Incidents based on sexual orientation or gender identity comprised 25 percent of those reported by educators but just 10 percent of those reported in the news media.

Although we found a small number of incidents directed toward cisgender girls—including a fair amount of sexual innuendo—the overwhelming majority of incidents in this category targeted people who identify outside of cisgender or heterosexual identities. This form of harassment and bias starts in elementary school and ratchets up in middle and high school.

Anti-LGBTQ hate starts where it always has, with the use of "gay" and other adjectives as pejoratives.

Anti-Immigrant

Animus toward people perceived to be immigrants led to a significant amount of harassment in schools; about 18 percent of the incidents that educators reported were directed toward people seen as "foreign." This category comprised 4 percent of the incidents reported in the news media.

Many educators reported hearing slurs—including some they thought had been long abandoned. While most of the abuse targeted Latinx students, anyone who was "foreign-looking" was subject to being targeted.

The anti-immigrant beliefs expressed by young people closely follow the rhetoric coming from the White House. One Texas elementary school teacher dryly noted that "Mr. Trump's 'wall' has encouraged a series of remarks."

Compared to other incidents, hate directed toward those perceived to be immigrants in school was less likely to make the news. Educators reported that anti-immigrant incidents they witnessed made the news at a rate of about 2 percent—less than half the average.

These incidents were also less likely to provoke a response from administrators. When confronted with anti-immigrant misbehavior, administrators rarely investigated. And, when immigrants were targeted, few administrators chose to make public statements denouncing the harassment or supporting members of the targeted group.

Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism was involved in 11 percent of the incidents reported by educators and 18 percent of those reported in the media.

In our tracking of news reports, we noticed an uptick in anti-Semitic incidents toward the end of the year. A total of 82 were reported in the last three months of 2018 alone.

Anti-Semitism often came in the form of slurs or hate symbols; 68 percent of incidents reported in the news included swastikas. In our survey, we were told of swastikas scratched into bathroom tiles, carved into desks, painted on parking lots, burned into football fields, and inked on skin. Several schools saw photos posted of students aligned in a swastika formation. And educators from two schools—one in Mississippi and one in New Jersey—reported that graduating seniors drew swastikas in the yearbooks of Jewish classmates.

Educators also told us they were hearing jokes about the Holocaust and a resurgence of Holocaust denial from students. Anti-Semitism was explicitly tied to white-power messaging, as well. For example, a high school teacher in California reported that a student stated, "Jews need to die, and Puerto Ricans should go back to their country."

When faced with anti-Semitic incidents, school leaders were more likely to respond in multiple ways. Educators told us that school leaders were more likely than average to communicate with families, denounce the act, make a public statement, and investigate to assess whether the school climate was hostile to Jewish students.

Anti-Muslim

Anti-Muslim incidents numbered the fewest among the five categories reported by educators (6 percent) and reported in the news. Altogether, we identified more than 200 anti-Muslim hate and bias incidents. The vast majority of these—almost 88 percent—came from educators, not news reports. Teachers reported hearing Muslim students—or those perceived as Muslim—called names such as "terrorist," "bomber," "Osama," or "ISIS." One educator told us of classmates pressuring a student to translate the phrase "Death of America" into Arabic. Another told us of a student who complained that a poster illustrating a young woman in a hijab in front of an American flag was "offensive to him."

These incidents weren't limited to students. An educator in Wisconsin told us about families going to the school board to protest an eighth-grade English language arts unit based on the book *I Am Malala*. A teacher in Illinois told us that parents contacted school leaders after seeing a Muslim parent take pictures outside the school. Some of them demanded that the parent be investigated.

Anti-Muslim incidents reported by educators were far less likely than average to make the news, and educators reported that they're also less likely to result in disciplinary action. While school leaders responded to anti-Muslim hate at about the average rate, only about a third of the incidents resulted in disciplinary action. Anti-Muslim hate was also the least likely to prompt communication with parents or public support of the targeted group.

It Doesn't Have to Be This Way

Although the problem is widespread, not every school is affected. About one-third of the educators reported witnessing no incidents in the fall of 2018. Some noted that school had been in session for only a few months, but many others explained why their schools were hate-free.

Leadership is important. An elementary teacher in Maryland listed several school-based anti-bias initiatives and added, "Our principal is very strong in supporting [the initiatives], … and is determined to get more shareholder support from staff, students, and community. I feel fortunate to be working in a school with such a forward-thinking anti-bias attitude and community."

In Arizona, a teacher at a preK–8 school wrote, "I consider my school a safe and tolerant place. Our administration is on top of behavior that may cause issues."

And it's not just administration. Everyone needs to be on board. "We have an amazing, supportive staff," a Colorado high school teacher wrote. "This is a great place for students and staff!"

Others cited specific programs—including the Anti-Defamation League's No Place for Hate, Teaching Tolerance's Mix It Up at Lunch Day, Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports strategies, and the Second Step anti-bullying program—as evidence of the beneficial steps that administrators were taking to set the right tone and expectations.

Many connected the need for a "welcoming" and "inclusive" school with the fact that their students represent traditionally marginalized populations. A Missouri elementary educator wrote, "We are a welcoming school and support and help our new immigrants." Others noted that they serve LGBTQ families, have elementary students transitioning to a different gender, or work in trauma-sensitive schools.*

How We Can Turn Things Around

Every American must take steps to make our schools and our communities safe and more accepting:

- Elected leaders need to unequivocally denounce white supremacy and racist, xenophobic, and anti-LGBTQ words and actions.
- Educators need to address these issues in their classrooms.
- We should all look at our local school boards and governments and ask if everyone in our community is represented, and we should work to hold local school authorities accountable for school climate and student safety.
- When we witness harassment, bullying, or bigotry, we must be upstanders—modeling courage, compassion, empathy, and civility.
- People of conscience—regardless of race or ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, or gender identity—must stand up for what is right. Bystanders contribute to the problem; upstanders help stop it. Apathy is not an option.

If we lead this work in each of our communities, we will begin to be knit together by our common support for each other. As educators, parents, and students begin the new school year and candidates wage political campaigns, let us all respect America's great diversity and reject hatred and division. ☐

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Developing Inclusive Youth

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Group identity, though, along with negative messages from adults and the media, often perpetuates in-group preference, which fosters out-group dislike. It is of paramount importance to determine how best to reduce prejudice early in life, not only because by adulthood prejudice is deeply entrenched and difficult to change, but also for facilitating healthy development and motivating children to enjoy school and achieve academically. □

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