



Issue Brief

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Identity-based Bullying in Texas Schools

Policy Recommendations

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To develop safe and healthy school environments, schools must be able to respond to bullying and harassment appropriately and take deliberate action to prevent it. This includes incidences where the bullying taking place is based on or related to a student's identity, such as their race, ethnicity, national origin, sex, gender, religion or disability status.

Students across Texas have been increasingly reporting alarming examples of identity-based bullying in schools – fueled in part by misinformation spread as a result of recent efforts to attack and undermine diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in education.

- For example, Black students in [Lubbock](#) have been called the “N-word” on a near-daily basis, frequently referred to as “porch monkeys,” forced to listen to other students making “monkey sounds” at them in class and told to “go pick cotton.” Students in one Lubbock middle school were subjected to the sounds of cracking whips as they walked through the halls. Another Black student, out of breath while working out during football practice, was taunted by other students jeering, “He can’t breathe like George Floyd.” (IDRA, 2022)
- In [Mission](#), students sent a 13-year-old Black girl racist comments and photos, including photoshopping her face onto the image of Emmett Till’s mutilated body and onto a graphic image of a KKK lynching, circulating the content on social media (Bride, 2023).
- In [Spring Branch](#), a mother reported that her son, who is black and has special needs, “was

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lured off campus and allegedly beaten by five white students who also attend the same high school” (Edsitty, 2019). The child sustained a concussion from the fight and was also the victim of social media threats that [included](#) a “meme insinuating that the student would be the victim of a school shooting, as well as a graphic photo of a lynching” (Solomon, 2019).

- In [Southlake](#), a Jewish student reported repeatedly experiencing bullying about his facial features and “gas chambers” at school, which was so severe that he contemplated suicide and forced him out of the school system (Hixenbaugh, 2021).
- In [Plano](#), students called a 13-year-old Black boy racial slurs and beat him with a belt in the boy’s locker room. The student was so miserable, he quit the football team. Later, at a sleepover where the bullies were present, students shot him with a BB gun, slapped him and made him drink their urine. (Cronin, 2021)
- In [Austin](#), students defaced student parking spots with racist, homophobic, and antisemitic slurs and images, including depictions of swastikas and the N-word (Ruiz, 2021). Similar slurs were reported in [Westlake](#) (Caprariello, 2020).
- In [East Texas](#), a Black student with autism was photographed in the bathroom, and students circulated the picture online with a caption mocking his disability and using a racial slur (Roy & Menezes, 2022).
- In [Aledo](#), high school students created a social media group pretending to auction their Black classmates. One week after the discovery of the social media group, fliers were disseminated across school campuses in the Aledo school district announcing a “Great Sale of Slaves.” (Amelash, et al., 2021)
- In [Katy](#), parents reported that students “screamed racial slurs” at minority girls during a district volleyball game, including “making monkey sounds” when Black girls were serving the ball (Rayford, 2022).
- And in [Grand Prairie](#), a student posted a video on social media showing several Black students “using a derogatory word and sticky notes to spell out a racial slur before saying it aloud in class” (Jefferson, 2023).

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These are just a handful of examples demonstrating the need for change.

According to a recent [report by the Charles Butt Foundation](#), Texas parents identified bullying as the greatest risk to safety, belonging and inclusion in Texas schools (2023). Parents of color are particularly concerned with the risk of racial bullying and discrimination in their schools: 69% of Black parents and 59% of Latino parents reported feeling that students face a moderate or large risk of discrimination based on their race or ethnicity. These findings are also supported by national data recently reviewed by the [Pew Research Center](#) (Minkin & Menasce Horowitz, 2023).

Bullying and harassment jeopardize students' ability to learn and undermine a school's climate, leaving many students, staff, and communities feeling unsafe and disconnected (Craven 2022).

We must ensure that students, school communities and parents have the necessary tools to prevent and address identity-based bullying and can support all students impacted by it.

Identity-based Bullying, Hate Crimes and Harassment are on the Rise in Schools

According to NCES, 22% of students ages 12-18 were bullied in 2019 (2019). While this is concerning standing alone, the urgency of identifying, preventing and responding appropriately to bullying is further underscored when viewing this data from a disaggregated lens: students increasingly report being bullied on the bases of their race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and religion (Alvis, et al., 2023; Brion-Meisels, et al., 2022).

Nationally, one in four students experienced bullying based on their race, national origin, religion, disability, gender or sexual orientation.

The U.S. Department of Justice defines identity-based bullying as bullying arising from a single significant act or pattern of acts by one or more students that is based on or targets a student's actual or perceived race, ethnicity, color, national origin, sex, gender, religion or disability status (Lahdon & Rapp, 2021). This also includes bullying based on association with a person or group of people with these characteristics.

Unfortunately, incidents of identity-based bullying, harassment and hate crimes are on the rise in Texas and across the nation. A 2021 report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that one in four students experienced bullying based on their race, national origin, religion, disability, gender or sexual orientation. The same report found that one in four students reported seeing hate words or symbols (such as those referencing racial or homophobic slurs) written in their schools. Another report making similar findings indicated that 23% of students reported seeing hate-related graffiti at school (Wang, et al., 2020).

Students report experiencing bullying on the basis of their religion. While many faith-based groups report experiencing such bullying, a survey by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding found that Muslim (60%) and Jewish (58%) students are most likely to experience religious discrimination, in addition to 26% of Catholics, 29% of Protestants, 43% of white Evangelicals, 27% of the non-affiliated, and 33% of the general public (Mogahed & Ikramullah, 2020).

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LGBTQ+ students report experiencing identity-based bullying and harassment at alarming rates. According to a 2021 national survey, 82% of LGBTQ+ students reported feeling unsafe in school because of at least one of their actual or perceived personal characteristics

– including 51% of LGBTQ+ students feeling unsafe because of their sexual orientation, 43% because of their gender expression, and 40% because of their gender (Kosciw, et al., 2021).

Also concerning, the number of hate crimes in schools has nearly doubled in recent years: in 2015–16, the number of hate crimes in schools was approximately 3,166. It increased to 5,732 in 2017–18 (OJJDP, 2022). The most common bias motivation for hate crimes in schools was race or color.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice’s Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, youth reporting being the victim of a hate crime overwhelmingly were victims of race-/ethnicity- and ancestry-motivated hate crimes. Black children continue to be a primary target of these harmful actions, representing 69% of the single-bias instances reported to the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) program in 2020 (FBI, 2020).

Given the alarming rate that these harmful incidents are increasingly occurring, school efforts to prevent and respond to bullying must account for the specific ways that bullying targets students on the basis of their identity and the magnified harm that students and a school community experience when the bullying behavior is motivated by bias or discrimination.

Identity-based Bullying Increases Risk for Mental Health Challenges and Exacerbates Existing Traumas

Effectively addressing bullying and harassment is critical to ensuring school safety and addressing youth mental health. Bullying is associated with negative health outcomes, such as depression and suicide, which can be exacerbated when students experience bullying on the basis of their identity (Alvis, et al., 2023; Kosciw, et al., 2021; Lutrick, et al., 2020; Garnett, et al., 2014).

Decades of research have shown that youth of color are at higher risk of being the victim of bullying, which may be due to experiences with discriminatory forms of bullying where an individual’s identity or identities are targeted through acts of verbal and/or physical assault (Alvis, et al., 2023; Galán, et al., 2021; Peskin, et al., 2006).

Alarmingly, existing prevalence rates are likely underestimations, as a recent study found that Black and Latino youth reported more experiences of bullying behaviors (*e.g.*, being threatened or put down by peers) but were less likely to endorse that they have been “bullied” (Lai & Kao, 2018) compared to white youth. As recently noted by researchers, “The underreporting of bullying victimization among youth of color may be due to cultural stigma and fear of backlash from authority figures who tend to enact more severe punishment and over police Black and Latino communities.” (Alvis, et al., 2023 citing Rios, 2011)

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The number of hate crimes in schools has nearly doubled in recent years.

While all forms of bullying are harmful and must be prevented and remediated when it does occur, research has shown that “identity-based bullying may have more deleterious effects on mental health relative to general bullying” because “identity-based bullying is often experienced as more threatening and severe, can be experienced as a violent assault on one’s sense of self, and is inherently demeaning and personal” (Alvis, et al., 2023).

Further, because youth of color are more likely to experience multiple types of traumatic events throughout their life, they are at greater risk for psychological symptoms in response to identity-based bullying (Alvis, et al., 2023; Douglas, et al., 2021).

Because youth are particularly vulnerable to social and emotional harm during adolescence, addressing identity-based victimization must be addressed swiftly, effectively and with attention to the particular harm caused by discriminatory bullying (Alvis, et al., 2023; Russell, et al., 2012).

Policymakers Must Act Now to Strengthen Policies Prohibiting and Preventing Identity-based Bullying

While Texas has made significant progress in addressing bullying in schools, schools do not have a clear framework for conducting bullying investigations, and TEA does not collect data on bullying targeting students based on their protected status. This valuable data would enable districts to craft effective anti-bullying programs to address trends and patterns in bullying and harassment incidences.

In addition, teachers have reported feeling unequipped and afraid to effectively address identity-based bullying and harassment due to misinformation about Texas education laws pertaining to prohibited concepts that can be taught and discussed in schools. The state must be clear that bullying on the basis of a person’s protected status, including their race and gender, is prohibited and ensure that school employees feel empowered to act to prevent or address racial bullying and harassment.

Federal guidance has historically provided that schools should seek to prevent and address bullying and harassment to protect students from physical and emotional harm this behavior causes (See, *e.g.*, OCR, 2010 (rescinded in part)). But many states and districts do not have the tools they need to address harassment and bullying appropriately. With instances of identity-based bullying and harassment on the rise, schools’ inability to respond appropriately compromises student and school safety, jeopardizes students’ mental health, and could affect overall school climate and hostile environment.

Researchers studying the impact of identity-based bullying and harassment continue to stress the importance of attending to identity and the impact of discrimination when

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addressing instances of bullying and implementing bullying prevention programs and initiatives (Alvis, et al, 2023; Russell, et al., 2012). Teachers and staff must be empowered to prevent bullying and respond appropriately when bullying takes place. A study of outcomes for youth that experience identity-based bullying as opposed to more general bullying shows that supportive teachers help mitigate the negative outcomes for students that experience general bullying (Mulvey, et al., 2018).

For students who experience identity-based bullying, however, supportive teachers alone were not enough to mitigate the negative outcomes for those students (Mulvey, et al., 2018). To address identity-based bullying, support all students and ensure school safety for all, teachers and staff must be trained and empowered to address prejudice and bias in schools.

Additionally, schools must have protocols in place to ensure that investigations of suspected or reported bullying are thorough, prompt and impartial (OCR, 2023; 2017; 2010; 1994). Schools should simultaneously assess potential mental health or academic issues and provide support for students experiencing them (Alvis, et al., 2023; Cornell & Limber, 2015).

Researchers also continue to emphasize the need to collect better, more comprehensive data about bullying to ensure more effective intervention and prevention measures, especially for students whose identity or identities may render them more susceptible to experiencing bullying (Mulvey, et al., 2018; GAO, 2012).

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Policymakers Must Take Action to Prevent and Respond Effectively to Identity-based Bullying

Policymakers can prevent and effectively address identity-based bullying by implementing the following recommendations.

- 1. Clearly identify, define and prohibit identity-based bullying and harassment.** School district policies should clearly outline what identity-based harassment is and make it clear that it is prohibited conduct under the district's policies.
- 2. Require schools to provide supportive measures to ensure student safety and continued access to educational programs and activities after a bullying incident has been reported.** Schools should ensure that students implicated in a report of a bullying incident are adequately supported while the school's investigation is underway. As an example, granting an impacted student an extension of academic deadlines may prevent that student from falling grades. In some cases, supportive measures may be for safety, like separating students or making class schedule modifications so that students in conflict reduce their interaction until a resolution can be reached.
- 3. Establish clear guidelines for conducting trauma-informed investigations of reports**

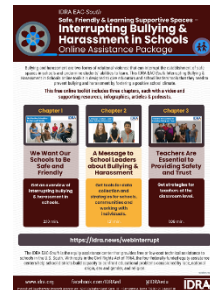
of identity-based bullying. School leaders need guidance to assist them in the investigation of identity-based bullying. By crafting clear guidelines for investigation, school districts enable school leaders to better identify, address and ultimately prevent identity-based bullying and to empower impacted students and families to participate in a school's investigation.

4. **Ensure impacted students and families are notified of a bullying investigation, have a meaningful opportunity to participate in the investigation, and receive information regarding resolution of their bullying complaint.** School administrators should ensure that students and families are aware of an investigation and adequately document their findings and determination. Students and their families should be given an opportunity to share their side of the story before any final decision is made.
5. **Ensure that student-oriented prevention policies and instructional standards explicitly address the prevalence, prevention and intervention of identity-based bullying and harassment.** State law and school policies should ensure that direct instruction and positive school culture programs include requirements for students to understand how to identify, report and interrupt bullying based on a range of behaviors, including based on a student's identity.
6. **Establish public reporting requirements to ensure that top policymakers in school systems are apprised of bullying and harassment prevalence** and to create transparency for the community about prevalence and institutional response. Without data as a tool, it is difficult, if not virtually impossible, for school districts, schools and communities to properly prevent and respond to incidences of bullying and harassment.
7. **Require schools to collect and report disaggregated data to better understand the prevalence of identity-based harassment and tailor prevention programming accordingly.** The failure to properly collect and assess data as relates to bullying and racial identity obscures the negative impact racial bullying has on students and schools and makes it a more difficult problem for schools and districts to solve.
8. **Make clear that education, prevention and response to identity-based bullying and harassment are not precluded in any way by a state or school district's "divisive concepts" law or policy.** Current state law discourages educators from discussing "controversial issues of public policy or social affairs." This language could be construed as prohibiting educators from discussing the prevalence of identity-based bullying with students and precluding educators from implementing strategies to reduce identity-based bullying. The legislature must make clear that schools have the responsibility and may use evidence-based resources to address identity-based bullying.
9. **Ensure bullying prevention and response training for educators includes information regarding how to identify and timely report incidents of identity-based bullying and harassment to appropriate school authorities.** Implementing training for educators and administrators on preventing, identifying and effectively responding to identity-

based bullying is critical. School policies should clarify the appropriate recipient of a bullying incident to ensure that it is documented and processed in a timely and trauma-informed manner. School policies should also ensure that identity-based bullying is reported to a school or district's equal educational opportunity or civil rights compliance administrator.

Additional resources, including a comprehensive literature review and strategies for schools, educators, and students to identify, address, and prevent bullying and harassment, are available in IDRA's online assistance toolkit, **Interrupting Bullying & Harassment in Schools**, available at <https://idra.news/webInterrupt>.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. Thank you for your consideration. For more information, please contact Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D., at paige.duggins-clay@idra.org.



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