

HATE AT SCHOOL

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ABOUT THE SOUTHERN POVERTY LAW CENTER

The Southern Poverty Law Center, based in Montgomery, Alabama, is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) civil rights organization founded in 1971 and dedicated to fighting hate and bigotry, and to seeking justice for the most vulnerable members of society.

ABOUT TEACHING TOLERANCE

A project of the Southern Poverty Law Center founded in 1991, Teaching Tolerance is dedicated to helping teachers and schools prepare children and youth to be active participants in a diverse democracy.

The program publishes *Teaching Tolerance* magazine three times a year and provides free educational materials, lessons and tools for educators committed to implementing anti-bias practices in their classrooms and schools. To see all of the resources available from Teaching Tolerance, visit tolerance.org.

For more information about the Southern Poverty Law Center, visit splcenter.org.



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CHAT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- *In New York, a middle school student writes in a textbook that he will lynch the black husband of a white teacher.*
- *In Illinois, white elementary students call black students apes and monkeys.*
- *In Minnesota, a middle school student tells a Latinx child that his mother should be in jail with all the illegal immigrants.*
- *In Massachusetts, a 10-year-old Muslim girl gets a note saying, “You’re a terrorist. I will kill you.”*
- *In Oklahoma, a fifth-grader draws a swastika and writes “white power” on his hand.*

Something ugly is happening in America’s schools.

And it’s not going away.

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

DADE PANNELL/INSTAGRAM

A STUDENT TAPED A PIECE OF PAPER WITH A SWASTIKA ON MY CLASSROOM WALL. THIS WAS A COUPLE DAYS AFTER THE SHOOTING AT THE TREE OF LIFE SYNAGOGUE, AND I AM JEWISH.

—EDUCATOR REPORT, WASHINGTON

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.

For this report, 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.
- 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 antisemitism 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.



With his xenophobic rhetoric and social media taunts, President Trump has been a polarizing force among children in many schools. Here, he speaks to students during a town hall while campaigning in Rothschild, Wisconsin, in April 2016.

SPOTLIGHTING—AND QUANTIFYING—THE PROBLEM

No one knows the extent of the problem nationally. In 2018, the SPLC’s Teaching Tolerance project collected hundreds of news reports detailing hate in schools directed toward individuals or groups on the basis of their perceived race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender expression, gender identity, immigration status, religion and more.¹

We counted 821 verified hate and bias incidents spanning every state and Washington, D.C. We define “hate and bias incidents” to include actions—verbal, written or physical—that target someone on the basis of identity or group membership. They include slurs, hate symbols, graffiti and harassment.

Most of the incidents that made the news (63 percent) were racist. They included racial slurs, primarily the n-word, along with a dozen accounts involving blackface and a handful involving nooses. Antisemitism accounted for 18 percent of the incidents. They often involved swastikas or invoked Nazis or the Holocaust. These incidents tended to happen outside of the classroom in more public spaces, such as the outside of the building or at a sporting event. In the case of swastikas, it was not uncommon for them to be found in

bathrooms. Social media often played a role in making these incidents public.

Many of the incidents drew outrage because they were perpetrated by adults, including coaches, school bus drivers, school board members and teachers.

We know, however, that only a fraction of the incidents that occur in schools ever makes the news. To get a clearer view of the bigotry that students are facing every day, we reached out to educators in elementary, middle and high schools.² More than 2,700 responded to our request, and they reported witnessing 3,265 hate and bias incidents in the fall of 2018 alone—an average of 1.2 percent incidents per respondent.

As with incidents reported in the media, race was the most common. Anti-LGBTQ harassment was not far behind. Many educators reported that anti-gay and anti-transgender slurs were extremely common and difficult to stop. Because educators were asked to describe incidents they had seen, the incidents they reported were more likely to have happened in class or in the school building.

Our data, though based on an unscientific survey, raises important questions: If 2,776 educators—from every U.S. state and Washington, D.C.—have witnessed this many instances of

hate and bias in a single school semester, just how commonplace are these incidents? And what are schools doing about them?

This report fleshes out and describes the problem. It uses data from both the teacher questionnaire and news reports. The teacher reports confirmed our suspicions: There are far more hate and bias incidents than make the news. And school leaders vary considerably in how they respond.

School leaders are responsible for nurturing and maintaining a healthy school climate. Best practices in countering hate and bias call for a range of actions to investigate, communicate, repair harm and restore the social fabric of the school. We asked educators about the actions their school leaders took to address incidents on their campuses: communicating with families; issuing public statements; providing professional development for school staff; investigating beyond the one act; supporting marginalized students; organizing pro-social activities; disciplining the offenders; denouncing the act; and reaffirming school values. The most common response was discipline, and even then, the vast majority of incidents resulted in no discipline at all.

To be clear, not every school is affected. About one-third of the teachers responding to our questionnaire witnessed no incidents in the first four months of the current school year. Many cited a positive school climate and lauded school leaders who work every day to create welcoming environments where hate and bias cannot thrive.

Negative Trends in School Climate

In 2016, Teaching Tolerance brought public attention to the school climate crisis in two reports, *The Trump Effect* and *After Election Day: The Trump Effect*. Based on surveys of thousands of educators during the campaign and immediately after the election, the reports revealed a wave of political and identity-based harassment in schools, where students across the nation were emboldened to bully and target classmates.

Educators detailed heightened anxiety among students from immigrant families and an uptick in verbal harassment and derogatory language based on race, religion and ethnicity.

Ninety percent of the educators said that the campaign and election had negatively affected the climate at their schools. More than half of elementary teachers and one-third of high school teachers were reluctant to teach about the election or current issues because of the climate. Most believed the negative climate would be long-lasting.³

Evidence is mounting that they were right:

In 2017, the Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access at the University of California at Los Angeles surveyed high school teachers. Educators reported that their schools had become hostile environments for racial and religious minorities and that white students especially had become more polarized and combative in class.⁴

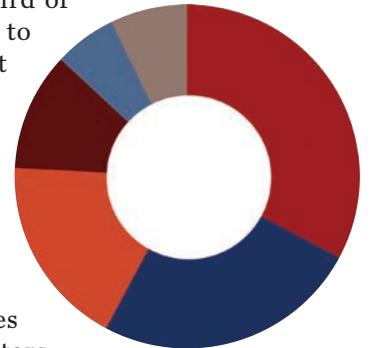
The FBI’s 2017 hate crime data—widely acknowledged as underreported—showed that hate crimes in K–12 schools and colleges increased by about 25 percent over 2016, considerably outpacing the national increase of 17 percent.⁵

In 2018, *Education Week* partnered with *ProPublica* to analyze school-based hate incidents from 2015 to 2017. They found 472 incidents. Most, they reported, “targeted black and Latino students, as well as those who are Jewish or Muslim.”⁶

In January 2019, scholars from the University of Virginia and the University of Missouri published a study in the peer-reviewed *Educational Researcher* comparing Virginia school climate survey results with 2016 election results and found an increase in middle school bullying in districts “favoring the Republican candidate.”⁷

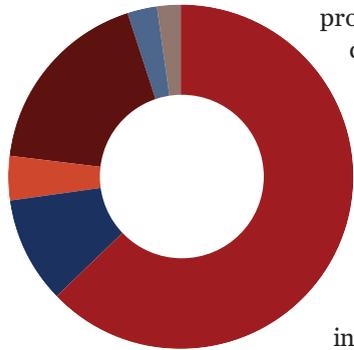
How Bias at School Affects Students

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.⁸ And there’s no shortage of studies on the effects of discrimination on young people’s health in the years



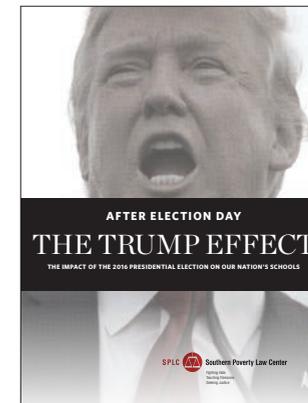
EDUCATOR-REPORTED HATE

- Racial or Ethnic 1,087 (33%)
- Anti-LGBTQ 803 (25%)
- Anti-immigrant 581 (18%)
- Antisemitic 366 (11%)
- Anti-Muslim 182 (6%)
- Other 246 (7%)



NEWS-REPORTED HATE INCIDENTS

- Racial or Ethnic 515 (63%)
- Anti-LGBTQ 80 (10%)
- Anti-immigrant 30 (4%)
- Antisemitic 145 (18%)
- Anti-Muslim 26 (3%)
- Other 25 (2%)



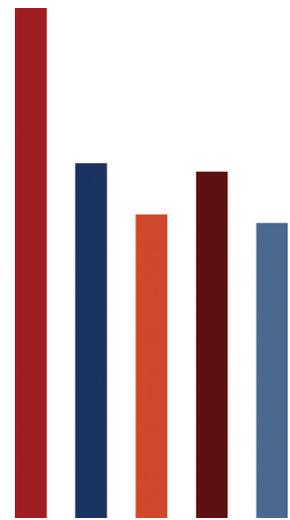
AP IMAGES/CHARLES REX ARBOGAST

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.⁹ These students are more likely to report symptoms of stress, depression, ADHD, risk-taking activities, school avoidance and more.¹⁰ Recent research suggests that racial-ethnic discrimination can cause behavioral problems for children as young as seven.¹¹

These effects vary based on whether the bias comes from school personnel, peers or others.¹² Students bullied by peers deal with both physical and emotional fallout that can follow them throughout their lives.¹³ Studies show the damage is compounded when the bullying is based on one of their identities.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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

Studies show that children targeted because of their identity can suffer long-term harm, including behavioral problems and depression, particularly when bias comes from school personnel.



WHEN SCHOOLS TAKE ACTION

- Racial or Ethnic **59%**
- Anti-LGBTQ **41%**
- Anti-immigrant **35%**
- Antisemitic **40%**
- Anti-Muslim **34%**

Incidents related to race and ethnicity were most likely to result in disciplinary action from school leaders, according to educators surveyed.

teachers feel worse about their academic abilities and are less likely to feel they belong at school, when compared to students who do not experience discrimination.”¹⁶

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.¹⁷



GETTY IMAGES/THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR/MELANIE STETSON-FREEMAN

At Reading Memorial High School in Massachusetts, swastikas and other racist graffiti have repeatedly been drawn on bathroom stalls and stairwells, scrawled on bench legs, and carved into railings. Police investigated more than 30 incidents between May 2017 and November 2018 but failed to identify any suspects.



THE HIERARCHY OF HATE IN SCHOOL

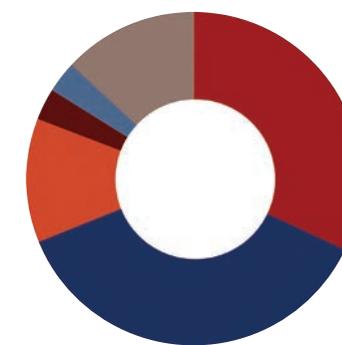
Whether looking at news media reports or reading educator stories, it’s clear that hate and bias are national, not regional, issues. We saw both media and educator reports from all 50 states and Washington, D.C., in 2018.

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.

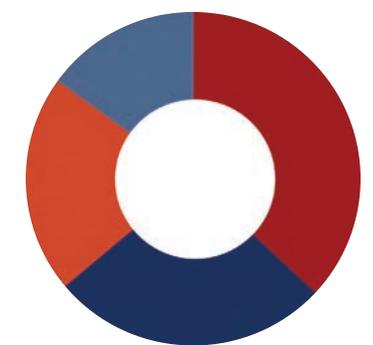
In this study, we catalogued the types of bias incidents reported by teachers. We found

that racial and ethnic bias were the most common, followed by incidents motivated by bias against the LGBTQ community, immigrants, Jews, Muslims, and “other.”



LOCATIONS FOR HATE AND BIAS

- Inside a classroom **32%**
- In a hallway, bathroom or elsewhere in a school building **37%**
- Outside of a building on school grounds **12%**
- In the community **3%**
- On social media **3%**
- Not reported **13%**



HIGH SCHOOLS ARE HOTBEDS

- High school **37%**
- Middle school **27%**
- Elementary school **21%**
- Other (combined and non-graded) **15%**

GETTY IMAGES/THE BOSTON GLOBE/JESSICA RINALDI



This Snapchat photo shows a student at Auburn High School in Alabama wearing a blackface mask and using a racial slur in the caption. The photo has been altered to obscure the student's face and the slur.

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. One teacher at a Washington high school described the use of the n-word as “Constant. Everywhere. All the time.” Educators also reported hearing racist, stereotypical tropes referring to black students, such as “darkie,” “cotton picker,” “ape,” “slave” and “monkey.”

Some statements, especially from younger children, may be explained as ignorant repetitions of bias and stereotypes they’re hearing at home. But a significant number of incidents reported by both educators and the news media include deeply disturbing displays of racial animus and white nationalism. In 2018, media outlets reported 25 cases that referenced the Ku Klux Klan and 19 accounts involving nooses in U.S. schools.

Administrators appear to be sensitive to racist incidents and, compared to other episodes of hate and bias, 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 targeted groups.

I DON'T WANT TO SIT BY YOU BECAUSE YOU'RE BLACK.

—SAID TO AN ELEMENTARY STUDENT BY CLASSMATE
EDUCATOR REPORT, MINNESOTA

SNAPCHAT

NOT GOING TO LIE. YOU FREAK ME OUT.

—SAID TO A TRANSGENDER SOPHOMORE BY ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL
MEDIA REPORT, WEST VIRGINIA

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.

LGBTQ teachers reported being harassed by students and colleagues. An educator in Texas told us that the LGBTQ community is “the most common marginalized/discriminated-against population. Using *gay* ... as an insult is done on a DAILY basis. Students use the word *faggot* as if it were no big deal—even though the

county we live in houses a big population who identify as LGBTQ.”

What’s new is the harassment of the increasing number of students who identify as gender-fluid and transgender, by both classmates and teachers, many of whom refuse to use preferred pronouns or names.

The topic is fraught with political overtones, with students and sometimes educators insisting that there are only two genders.

While a few extreme cases of transphobia made news in 2018, educators reported that fewer than 2 percent of the gender and sexual identity-based hate incidents they witnessed received media coverage—suggesting that anti-LGBTQ bias doesn’t create much outrage in many communities.

Hate based on gender and sexual identity, however, was among the most likely to lead administrators to provide support for marginalized students and to prompt school leaders to denounce the act and reaffirm the school’s values.

Anti-LGBTQ harassment typically begins in elementary school with the use of the word “gay.” One teacher reported that “[s]tudents use the word faggot as if it were no big deal.”



RACE AND ETHNICITY

Often in the form of slurs and racist iconography



Nearly 2 out of 3 news reports



1 out of 3 educator reports



Most likely to elicit a response from school leaders



SPEAK ENGLISH. THIS IS AMERICA!

—SHOUTED BY PARENTS AT LATINX PLAYERS, DURING A SOCCER GAME AGAINST A MAJORITY-WHITE HIGH SCHOOL
MEDIA REPORT, NEW JERSEY

On Halloween last fall, staff at Middleton Heights Elementary School in Idaho depicted President Trump’s “wall,” adorned with his campaign slogan. Others wore sombreros, ponchos, and fake mustaches in a stereotypical portrayal of Mexicans.

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.”

Here’s what “the wall” looks like in schools:

- Elementary students in a rural, majority-white school chanted “Build the wall!” during class and put paper signs with the slogan on their desks. *(reported by educator in Oregon)*

WHAT KIDS PERCEIVED TO BE IMMIGRANTS GET TOLD

- Go back to ...
- You’re not American.
- You’re not a real American.
- You need to go home.
- You don’t belong here.
- You’re going to get deported.
- Your parents will be deported.
- ICE is coming for you.
- I’m going to call ICE on you.
- You legal, bro?
- I will beat you back to China.
- If your country didn’t want you, why would we?

SOURCE: EDUCATOR SURVEY

- Elementary school staff and teachers smiled while posing for pictures in their Halloween costumes. One group wore sombreros, ponchos and fake mustaches while shaking maracas; another lined up so that their brick-painted costumes formed a “border wall,” complete with the slogan “Make America Great Again.” The photos were posted on the district’s Facebook page. *(reported by news media in Idaho¹⁸)*
- White high school students interlocked arms and walked together, chanting, “Build a wall! Build a wall!” while making eye contact with students of color. *(reported by educator in Washington)*

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-IMMIGRANT

Often involve political slogans

1 out of 27 news reports

1 out of 5 educator reports

Less likely to elicit a response from school leaders



GETTY IMAGES/THE BOSTON GLOBE/JESSICA RINALDI

Residents of Reading, Massachusetts, participate in a candlelight vigil to speak out against racism after swastikas and other racist symbols were repeatedly drawn, scrawled, and carved on surfaces in the town’s high school.

FACEBOOK

This swastika was painted on the parking lot of Glenelg High School in Maryland in May 2018. Sixty-eight percent of the antisemitic incidents identified in the news media involved swastikas.



ANTISEMITISM

Antisemitism 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 antisemitic incidents toward the end of the year. A total of 82 were reported in the last three months of 2018 alone.

Antisemitism 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. Antisemitism 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 antisemitic 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.

ANTISEMITISM

More than 200 teacher reports of swastikas at school



Nearly 1 out of 6 news reports



Fewer than 1 out of 9 educator reports



Likely to generate public outrage

I'M A FAN OF HITLER! GOD SENT HITLER DOWN TO KILL THE JEWS BECAUSE THEY NAILED JESUS TO THE CROSS.

—SAID BY AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENT
MEDIA REPORT, NEW YORK

GETTY IMAGES/BALTIMORE SUN/TNS/COLIN CAMPBELL



Anti-Muslim incidents reported by teachers were the least likely among the categories to result in disciplinary action.

ANTI-MUSLIM

Anti-Muslim incidents numbered the fewest among the five categories reported by educators (6 percent) and those 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 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.

ANTI-MUSLIM

1 out of 32 news reports



1 out of 18 educator reports



Least likely to result in disciplinary action

*YOU’RE A TERRORIST.
I WILL KILL YOU.*

—WRITTEN ON NOTES LEFT IN THE CUBBY OF A 10-YEAR-OLD MUSLIM GIRL
MEDIA REPORT, MASSACHUSETTS

REDUX/PANOS PICTURES/ABBIE TRAYLER-SMITH



POLITICS IS A FORCE MULTIPLIER

In the 2016 *Trump Effect* reports, we reported that bullying had been politicized, with even young students latching on to political talking points and slogans as a way of isolating and intimidating others. This investigation found a continuation of this trend.

Educators told us that this level of polarization they’re seeing is a new phenomenon and that even elementary students are affected. “In my 20 years of teaching,” a Maine educator wrote, “I have never heard students in grades 1–5 so politically divided.”

While it’s important to recognize that political polarization—and the behavior it enables—contributes to an environment where hate can flourish, we did not include political incidents in our tally of hate and bias in schools. One important exception was when political figures and slogans were used to excuse harassment. Most often, political harassment targeted Muslim students or those perceived to

be immigrants. But educators reported many incidents in which students combined political rhetoric with bad behavior.

A middle school teacher in Maryland, for example, heard white male students talking about “Trump ‘making America white again.’” And an elementary teacher in Indiana told us of a child who “slapped a student’s bottom and said that Trump says it is okay.”

Polarization manifests not only across a range of issues but also around the president himself, as students divide themselves into pro- and anti-Trump teams. An educator in Georgia, for example, told us that students “as young as kindergarten” are saying, “Yay Trump” or “Trump sucks.” An elementary school teacher in Nebraska told us, “Students have used the name Trump to taunt others. At times it is telling kids that Trump is going to send them home. Other times students have called other kids ‘Trump’ as a put-down.” An

elementary teacher in Arizona told us that “students have come to me crying during recess because someone else was bullying them (‘They said I like Trump, but I don’t’).”

Attacks go both ways, often within the same school or class. Educators recalled a litany of student insults such as “republican asshole,” “rethuglicans,” “liberal bacteria” and “libtard snowflakes”—sometimes even during class discussions.

Polarization impedes civic education

Insults like these, educators report, stymie civil classroom discussions of controversial issues and embolden students to demonize their opponents. Political polarization and hair-trigger responses aren’t just happening in social studies classes where students should be discussing current events and politics; they also erupt in English, math, science and during counseling sessions.

Here’s some of what educators told us about polarization and its chilling effect on civics instruction in their schools:

- “Whenever we discuss politics or current events as a class, the class becomes divided along party lines leading to conflict.” (High school, New York)
- “I teach American history and we discuss current events frequently. The discussions over the last two years are much more difficult to facilitate. Students are quick to disagree with each other and discussions become heated much more quickly than they have in the past. And, I admit that I find it difficult myself to deal with the realities of talking about the current administration when students ask questions like, ‘Do women lie about sexual harassment?’” (Middle school, Ohio)

- “As a social studies teacher, I feel unable to teach current events around government issues due to the political tone in our nation. When it comes up, it is divisive among the students.” (Middle school, Massachusetts)

- “In class discussions, students take sides very quickly and refuse to listen to people’s views; they are more likely to shout down or openly diss an opinion they don’t agree with. They are more likely to say negative things about the person rather than argue about the ideas.” (K–12 school, North Dakota)

- “Any time ‘president’ or ‘Trump’ or any past president is mentioned, an argument between students is inevitable. Living in Texas, we have several students that are immigrants, and some have parents stuck on the other side of the border. For them, decisions made are very personal. ... Arguments are so heated, I’ve had to immediately stop any conversation about politics in my science classroom for fear of fights.” (High school, Texas)

Teachers report that their students are deeply polarized politically and, in many schools, divided into pro-Trump and anti-Trump camps. This polarization has had a chilling effect on civics instruction.

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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, or work in trauma-sensitive schools.

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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 prepare for the new school year and candidates wage political campaigns, let us all respect America’s great diversity and reject hatred and division.

The Southern Poverty Law Center and Teaching Tolerance, along with many other organizations, have signed onto a statement of principles under the banner of “Countering Hate.” We invite others to join us here: splcenter.org/countering-hate.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

When we reported on the impact of the Trump election on school climate in the fall of 2016, we hoped that its effect would fade with the start of a new school year. But the 2017–18 school year began in the shadow of Charlottesville, and we continued to see news reports of hate in schools. We set up an array of Google news alerts and began tracking and reporting on the incidents. In the first month, October 2017, we counted 90 incidents and published our first regular monthly report with the aim of informing educators and administrators.

Since we were counting only those incidents that had been publicly reported, we suspected that we were seeing only the tip of the iceberg. In December 2018, we polled educators to test our hypothesis. We shared the survey in our newsletter and through several organizations, including the National Education Association.

We asked educators to describe incidents involving hate symbols or the targeting of others on the basis of politics, religion, race, ethnicity, gender or sexual identity. We asked them to report only incidents that had occurred so far in the 2018–19 school year. Respondents were not randomly selected, so we don't claim they are a representative sample of the national teaching force. However, a comparison to National Center for Education Statistics data reveals that our sample is geographically representative.

In all, we received 3,042 responses. After we removed respondents teaching outside of a K–12 setting, the number of valid responses totaled 2,776.

The questions answered by survey respondents are available for review in the appendix.

APPENDIX SURVEY QUESTIONS

Where is your school or district located?

Which of these best describes your work setting?

- Elementary school
- Middle/intermediate school
- High school
- Ungraded/Alternative school
- Comprehensive (K–12) school
- District office
- Other (please specify)

Which best describes the student population in your setting?

- Primarily white (75 percent–100 percent white students)
- Primarily students of color (75 percent–100 percent students of color)
- Mix of students of color and white students

Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your school and community?

Have you seen or heard about incidents of vandalism or graffiti involving hate symbols or slurs this school year? Yes/no

Have you seen or heard about the display of Confederate flags on school property this school year? Yes/No

Have you seen or heard about harassment, threats, slurs or name-calling based on politics this school year? Yes/No

Have you seen or heard about harassment, threats, slurs or name-calling directed at immigrants in your school this school year? Yes/No

Have you seen or heard about harassment, threats, slurs or name-calling directed at Muslims in your school this school year? Yes/No

Have you seen or heard about harassment, threats, slurs or name-calling based on race in your school this school year? Yes/No

Have you seen or heard about harassment, threats, slurs or name-calling based on gender or sexual orientation at your school this school year? Yes/No

Have you seen or heard about antisemitic harassment, threats, slurs or name-calling at your school this school year? Yes/No

Have you seen or heard about social media posts (including photos or videos) or pranks (involving people at your school) that targeted groups based on their identities this school year? Yes/No

If a respondent answered “yes” to any of the previous questions, they were asked these follow-up questions. These questions were repeated each time the questions above were answered in the affirmative.

Please describe the incident(s) briefly. Be specific about the symbol or language.

Who was responsible for the incident(s)?

- Student(s)
- Teacher
- Staff
- Family member
- Someone outside of the school community
- Unknown
- Other (please specify)

Where did the incident(s) happen?

- Inside a classroom
- At a sporting event
- In the building
- Outside of the building on school grounds
- In the community
- On social media
- Other (please specify)

Was there media coverage?

- Yes
- No

How did school or district leaders respond? (Select all that apply.)

- Disciplined or took other action against the perpetrators
- Cited privacy as a reason not to discuss the incident or share details
- Communicated (e.g., by text or email) with parents
- Issued a public statement
- Denounced the act and reaffirmed the school's values
- Investigated beyond the one act
- Provided support for marginalized students
- Provided guidance or professional development for school staff
- Organized pro-social activities
- Other (please specify)

Is there anything else you'd like us to know?

What is your name? (We will not share it without your permission.)

- I prefer to remain anonymous.
- My name is:

Please provide your email address. (We will never share your email address without your permission.)

- I'd prefer not to.
- Here's my email address:

The report we wrote after our last survey drew media attention to classrooms. We expect this to happen again. If you would like the opportunity to tell your story or the story of your students, answer YES to give us permission to provide your email address to a journalist.

ENDNOTES

1 Focusing on targeted individuals or groups allowed us a way to control for incidents that included multiple expressions of hate. Under our methodology, the sharing of a racist symbol accompanied by a racial slur counted as one incident of hate based on race or ethnicity. The sharing of a racist symbol accompanied by an anti-Muslim slur, however, counted as two incidents—one based on race or ethnicity and one based on religion.

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