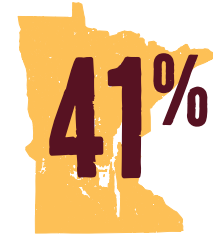


# Breaking through on identity-based bullying and aggression

## CREATING A SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT FOR STUDENTS

Every young person has great potential. Each day school staff contribute to making a place where students can learn, explore, and see what is possible for themselves and their futures. At school, you create an environment that sparks their curiosity and confidence.

However, the reality is that Minnesota students are reporting being bullied at school in high numbers. You can take action to ensure school is a safe place for students to show up and learn.



of Minnesota high school students have been bullied or harassed in the past month about their identity or stigmatized personal characteristics

“PEOPLE WANT TO SAY YOU’RE BEING RACIST WHEN YOU CALL SOMEONE THE N-WORD OR SOMETHING, BUT THERE ARE SO MANY MORE SUBTLE WAYS TO BE RACIST, AND MORE HURTFUL, EVEN, THAN JUST STRAIGHT-UP SAYING SOMETHING RACIST.

— STUDENT, AGE 15

### BULLYING IS AN EVOLVING CHALLENGE. AND IT MAY NOT LOOK THE SAME AS IT ONCE DID.

Aggression based on characteristics like gender, race or ethnicity, sexuality, and body size is deeply harmful for students, even if it presents differently than bullying as it is traditionally understood.

Aggression that focuses on a student’s identity attacks the core of who they are, the unique background and experiences that shape who they are as they move through the world, now and as an adult. These aggressions are cumulative and constant reminders of persecution and injustices that have been historically experienced by people who share their gender, race, sexual orientation, and body size.

There are actions you can take to make sure identity-based aggression does not hold students back or create a climate where they feel afraid to be present and ready to participate in class.

MICROAGGRESSIONS ARE A COMMON TYPE OF ATTACK RELATED TO IDENTITY. THESE SUBTLE INSULTS OR ACTIONS ADD UP AND TELL A STUDENT THAT THEY DON’T BELONG.

3.5x

Students of color are bullied or harassed about race, ethnicity, country of origin 3.5 times more than white students.

8x

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning students are bullied or harassed about their sexual orientation 8 times more than straight students.

6.5x

Transgender and gender diverse students are bullied or harassed about their gender 6.5 times more than cisgender students.

2x

Overweight or obese students are bullied or harassed about their weight or size 2 times more than students at a healthy weight or underweight.

## HARMFUL IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Students who experience this type of hostility have a variety of adverse physical, emotional, and behavioral health outcomes. Research has shown that experiencing identity-based aggression is linked with general health symptoms like headaches and stomach aches, substance use problems, and poorer mental health. These experiences also affect school engagement and performance.

“I DIDN’T THINK IT WAS THAT BIG A PROBLEM UP UNTIL I FELT LIKE I NEEDED TO LEAVE THAT SCHOOL, WHICH I DID. BUT IT WAS DEFINITELY AFFECTING A LOT OF MY LIFE. IT WAS AFFECTING MY GRADES, IT WAS AFFECTING HOW I PLAYED SPORTS, IT WAS AFFECTING MY FAMILY.

— STUDENT, AGE 14



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“ IF THEY DON'T HEAR IT OR THEY DON'T QUITE KNOW WHAT TO DO, THAT'S THE CRACK THAT WATER STARTS TO SEEP THROUGH AND CREATES A BIGGER SPACE. TO ME, IF YOU HAVE A COMMITTED GROUP OF EDUCATORS WHO IN EVERY SINGLE ROOM, IN EVERY SINGLE HALLWAY, ADDRESS IT IMMEDIATELY, THAT'S WHERE YOU'RE THE MOST EFFECTIVE

— ASSOCIATE PRINCIPAL

## SCHOOL STAFF CAN MAKE A REAL DIFFERENCE

This type of aggression may be unfamiliar, but you can be a part of the solution. Together, staff can make sure students know that **their school is a community where they can learn, engage, and explore their full potential**. You don't have to be an expert in all the different terms and insults in order to respond. You just have to do what already comes naturally: **be an adult who wants to create the best place for students to show up as their full selves and learn.**

### A CONTINUUM OF RESPONSES AND SUPPORT IS AVAILABLE

Your words and actions speak volumes to students. The following are resources for you, other school staff, and students to address identity-based aggression in your school.



#### LEARN WHEN AND HOW TO INTERVENE

**Early intervention can mean better outcomes for all students involved.** There is a continuum of responses to fit the situation and students involved, creating immediate safety, and the opportunity for deeper empathy and learning.

**If you see something, do something.** Your response doesn't only support the students involved, it shows the students around them that there are adults that have their back.

**Simple responses and questions can be powerful.** Saying, “*You know that language doesn't fly at this school,*” “*Were you trying to be hurtful with that word?*” or “*I don't find that funny*” can shift the interaction in important ways. The “[Speak Up at School Guide](#)” provides concrete recommendations for responding to incidents as they arise, and the Minnesota Department of Education has this [resource guide](#) for school staff responding to racism, violence, and trauma.

**Education MN** has [more resources](#) to learn about identity-based aggression, how students experience it, and how other teachers and schools are responding.

#### SUPPORTING STUDENTS

**A trusted adult relationship at the school makes a difference** for all students, and it is especially important for students who have identities that are historically persecuted or face injustice. You have the power to listen to them, believe them, and take action to support their safety.

**Make sure students know about the process to report aggressions,** whether it's them or other students experiencing it.

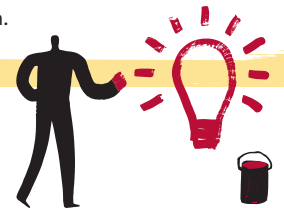
**Know what to do when a student is distressed,** particularly due to identity-based aggression. Learn more about [psychological first aid](#), your school's protocol, when support staff are available, and when it is appropriate to call 911.

**Following up with students shows that you are there to support them,** whether they have been targeted or were the aggressor, this lets them know you are there for their continued growth.

#### TRAININGS AND SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL STAFF AND TEACHERS

**Know that you have the support of other staff, teachers, and school leadership.** You do not have to be the expert, you have a team around you to manage the situation and make sure all students have the resources they need.

**Attend trainings provided by your school, and advocate for more advanced training on this topic.** There are experts and resources that you can access to learn more about breaking out of a bystander role, what to do when you witness identity-based aggression, using culturally responsive strategies, and creating a [trauma-informed school](#), available through [Education MN](#) or the [Minnesota Department of Education](#).



## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

This research uses data from the Minnesota Student Survey, the School Health Profiles Survey, focus groups with diverse youth boards, and interviews with Minnesota students, parents, and school personnel. To learn more about identity-based aggression and how you can support your school staff and students, visit [Healthy Environments and Vulnerable Youth](#) for more information on our methods, findings, and recommendations.

This study was funded by the University of Minnesota Department of Pediatrics New Team Science Grant, supported by the Minnesota Masonic Charities Fund. For a digital copy of this document, including active web links to resources, visit: <https://z.umn.edu/Healthy-Environments-for-Vulnerable-Youth>