Bullying and Harassment

May 2016

In the past 15 years, the communities served by the Northshore School District (NSD) have experienced significant change, becoming more ethnically and economically diverse. This increasing diversity mirrors changes that are happening throughout the Northwest region and has contributed to both opportunities and challenges in NSD, including increased reports of bullying and harassment based on race, ethnicity, gender, economics, and sexual preference, in addition to cultural differences.

As part of ongoing efforts to create a positive environment for all students, families, and staff, NSD has commissioned Education Northwest, a nonprofit research organization, to produce a series of equity data briefs. These briefs examine perceptions of the social and academic climate in district schools, as well as variation across key academic outcomes. They will inform school district programs and are an important piece of NSD’s equity and diversity action plan.

This short report describes student, parent, and staff perceptions of bullying and harassment in NSD, including their perspectives on what schools are and are not doing to address these issues.

Why this matters

In 2014 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Department of Education, and the Health Resources and Services Administration partnered with bullying experts to develop the following uniform definition of bullying for research and surveillance:

“Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm.”

Sexual harassment is defined as unwanted behavior of a sexual nature that interferes with a person’s right to an equal education. It may include lewd comments, inappropriate touching, and homophobic slurs. Bullying and harassment both have significant negative impacts on students’ education, health, and well-being.

• Students who are bullied and harassed have higher rates of absenteeism and are less engaged in school.
• Students who are bullied and harassed have lower grades and are more likely to drop out of school.
• Students who are bullied and harassed show higher rates of physical and mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress.
• Bias-based bullying is more harmful to students’ health than general bullying.
• Students who bully others are at a greater risk for alcohol and drug abuse, criminal conviction, and being in abusive relationships.

Key Findings

- Most parents believe their child’s school is safe, but reports of bullying in NSD schools are common.
- Parents of African American students are more likely than other parents to report that their children have experienced bullying.
- Students report that race-based bullying occurs frequently in NSD schools.
- Girls reported experiencing sexual harassment and LGBTQ students reported experiencing gender-based bullying.
- Many students feel that school staff members do not believe their complaints about bullying and do little to protect them from it.
- Several parents, especially those with children who have experienced bullying, feel that schools do not adequately address it.
- Students and parents feel that there are few opportunities to discuss bullying and prejudice in schools and that there are no formal mechanisms for reporting incidents.
- Teachers and administrators believe students are generally accepting of each other and suggest that students may be overidentifying prejudice.

About the project
This report is part of the larger NSD Equity Review project. This series addresses two key questions:

1. What are the social and academic experiences of different communities and families in NSD?
2. How well is NSD serving the academic needs of all students?

Topics covered in this series include:
- Community reflections on diversity
- Bullying and harassment
- Student suspensions
- High school and college readiness
Data Details

This report is one in a series based on three data sources: community focus groups, parent surveys, and district administrative data. In the focus groups and surveys, respondents were asked to share their perspectives on several topics about NSD schools, including: welcoming and inclusive cultures, fair treatment of students, academic and social support, bullying, participation, and academic expectations. Surveys were available in both English and Spanish. Analysis of district administrative data included indicators of college readiness, high school transition, school discipline, and early elementary academic performance.

Parent surveys

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<td>High school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Missing/Other</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
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<td>Inglemoor Pathway Schools</td>
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<td>Woodinville Pathway Schools</td>
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<td>Missing/Other</td>
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<td>&lt;1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3,200</td>
<td>100</td>
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<th>Parent race/ethnicity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
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<td>East Asian American</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Total across all race/ethnicities</td>
<td>3,200</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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Community focus groups

54 focus groups in total
375 participants
32 parent focus groups, one per NSD school
9 student focus groups, one per junior high and high school
6 teacher focus groups
1 administrator focus group
8 culturally specific, community focus groups

Student data

- Participation in advanced high school coursework
- Participation in SAT
- Attendance in selective grades
- Course performance in selective grades
- Suspensions

Note: Student data provided without student names.
Evidence
Most parents believe their child’s school is safe, but reports of bullying in NSD schools are common.

On the parent survey respondents were asked to share their perceptions of school safety. Ninety-one percent of parents agreed or strongly agreed that their child feels safe at school (see Figure 1). In addition, 86 percent reported that school staff members would address their concerns about their child’s safety. Despite overall positive perceptions of school safety, 37 percent of parents reported that their child had personally experienced bullying. Nationally, about one out of four students report being bullied during the school year.²

Figure 1. Most parents feel their child is safe at school

I’ve seen bullying in this school more than I would like to admit.
Junior high parent

Note: * Indicates question is reverse coded. Sample: Total number of Northshore School District parents who completed the survey: 3,200. Questions were not required, and therefore the number of respondents per question varies.

Parents of African American students were more likely than other parents to report that their children have experienced bullying.

More than 60 percent of parents of African American children indicated that their children have experienced bullying at school (Figure 2). In contrast, 40 percent of parents of White and Latino students said that their children had been bullied. Parents of South Asian and East Asian students were the least likely to report that their children had experienced bullying (26 and 24 percent, respectively).

Figure 2. More than half of the parents of African American students reported that their child has experienced bullying

| Ethnicity          | N   | Percent Agreeing
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
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<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1,609</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
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<td>37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other</td>
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<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>South Asian</td>
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<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>131</td>
<td>24</td>
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Note: Vertical dash represents the district average. Differences between groups were statistically significant (p=0.000). The racial/ethnic group ‘Other’ includes respondents who identified their child as other, Native American, or multiracial.
Students report that race-based bullying occurs frequently in NSD schools.

Across all focus groups, junior high and high school students reported witnessing extensive bullying and harassment in their schools. Most of the incidents described by students involved derogatory slurs and insults directed at students of color. Students also described more subtle forms of bullying, such as comments with racial undertones or comments that were based on racial/ethnic stereotypes. While these behaviors sometimes began as “jokes,” they often made students feel targeted or uncomfortable.

“Sometimes you hear a racist joke or something like that. That happens a lot. There are some people who are always making racist jokes about other people. We are scarring other kids with our words.”
Junior high student

“My dad is from India. Students make jokes about Indians being terrorists.”
Junior high student

“It’s my name. I should be able to correct someone when they don’t say it properly, without worrying about getting sent to the office.”
Junior high student

“We hear comments based on stereotypes and race, such as ‘Of course you’re good at math—you’re Asian.’”
High school student

“In our school, there was a Halloween play that included racist jokes and curse words ... some of us felt this promoted racist stereotypes. It really bugs me that a teacher approved it.”
High school student

“I constantly deal with comments that have negative connotations about my African background, including the ‘N’ word.”
High school student

Some jokes are funny at first but then they are not, and you want to tell them to stop.
Junior high student
Girls reported experiencing sexual harassment and LGBTQ students reported experiencing gender-based bullying.

Girls described being sexually harassed in school. Harassing behavior included both verbal taunts and unwanted physical touching. LGBTQ students reported instances of gender harassment in which they were teased or excluded for not following the norms typical for their gender. Gay students were called names, and in a few cases were physically harassed by other students. Students also noted that “gay” was used as an insult or a taunt by some students.

“I feel that students with a homosexual orientation are not treated respectfully. The school does not appreciate how hard it is being gay.”
High school student

“I have seen gay students experiencing bullying and harassment. For example, players from the football team target gay students and force them away from their lunch table.”
Junior high student

“I’m called gay more than people say hi to me. People call me Caitlin Jenner.”
Junior high student

“One boy kept touching my thigh, over and over again. When I finally complained, the teacher brushed it off and said he was just being a boy. We never spoke about it again, and I felt unsafe and no longer trusted either the student or the teacher.”
Junior high student

“Some people call other people gay for no particular reason. Why is that an insult?”
Junior high student

“If we complain about how guys treat us, we’re told we are overreacting or we’re punished for violating the dress code. Why do we get in trouble when the guys stare at us or slap our butts?”
Junior high student

“LGBTQ students are not made to feel welcome in this school.”
High school student

“Girls reported experiencing sexual harassment and LGBTQ students reported experiencing gender-based bullying.”

Junior high student

“Why is that an insult?”
Junior high student
Students feel that school staff members do not believe their complaints about bullying and do little to protect them from it.

Students reported that teachers, administrators, and counselors do very little to prevent bullying and harassment and in many cases have dismissed student reports of bullying and harassment as unfounded or an overreaction. Several students said they had witnessed school staff members tacitly participating in bullying or harassment. Students rarely saw disciplinary actions taken in response to their complaints and thus felt afraid to speak up against bullying. Consequently, students said they felt powerless to protect themselves or their peers.

“Sometimes teachers don’t believe us when we tell them about bullying.”
Junior high student

“Kids are afraid to speak out ... We should be able to tell teachers what we see and be believed and taken seriously, not pushed away.”
Junior high student

“I have seen teachers stand next to someone making fun of another kid and not do anything. I have heard them say it is ‘kids being kids.’ It hurts. Teachers need to intervene when kids are making racist comments.”
Junior high student

“I almost hate to say it, but one thing that would help is if teachers [monitored student interactions] more in the halls and lunchroom.”
Junior high student

“It feels like there is nothing we can do about bullying. Sometimes the teachers don’t really pay much attention.”
Junior high student

“I have suffered religious persecution from other students, and no action was taken by the teacher to stop it.”
High school student
Several parents, especially those with children who have experienced bullying, feel that schools do not adequately address it.

In the survey parents were asked whether they agreed that their child’s school did a good job of addressing bullying. Among parents whose children had experienced bullying, 42 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement (Figure 3), compared to 10 percent of other parents. In focus groups, some parents described feeling as if their complaints of bullying were dismissed by school and district staff members.

“Someone said to my daughter that Asians are dirty. She went to the principal and was reprimanded for accusing someone. The principal never addressed the issue that someone had insulted her.”
Junior high parent

“It can be difficult to get a response when there is a problem. I scheduled a meeting with the counselor and took off work to be there. The counselor canceled at the last minute and rescheduled. The second time he canceled again, and he never called back to reschedule. I followed up by phone, and his response was, ‘What do you want? Call me back after lunch.’ I never did get the meeting.”
Junior high parent

“You shouldn’t have to fear that if you speak up for your child you are going to be dismissed with the ‘Why are you pulling the race card?’ question.”
Junior high parent

Note: Vertical dash represents the district average. Differences between groups were statistically significant (p=0.000). The racial/ethnic group ‘Other’ includes respondents who identified their child as other, Native American, or multiracial.
Students and parents feel that there are few opportunities to discuss bullying and prejudice in schools and that there are no formal mechanisms for reporting incidents.

Students and parents described feeling as if school staff members avoid directly discussing bullying and prejudice. Students said they rarely talk about racism with teachers or how bullying and harassment affect students. They also noted that schools give up on their bullying interventions too quickly. Parents recommended that schools develop consistent policies and practices for responding to bullying. Parents also said they would like specific procedures for reporting bullying, prejudice, harassment, and racial bias.

“The school does not address racism or sexism and no one talks about bullying. Sometimes people don’t realize how much damage it can cause.”
Junior high student

“I need help identifying sexual harassment. I don’t know if I am making a big deal about nothing.”
Junior high student

“Our school could benefit from a systematic, comprehensive anti-bullying program. The school should teach and model appropriate behaviors.”
Elementary parent

“We want the district to have a formal plan for addressing racial issues like the one that occurred last year. We want more communication about what is happening.”
Junior high parent

“I would like to see specific procedures for identifying and reporting issues when prejudice or racial bias is at play. Currently, complaints are being dismissed for no clear reason.”
Junior high parent

“With a few exceptions, most of our teachers never talk about racism.”
Junior high student
Teachers and administrators believe that students are generally accepting of each other and suggest that students may be overidentifying prejudice.

School staff did not report seeing much bullying and said that, for the most part, students were “open-minded and welcoming.” A few said that bullying happens outside school and on social media but that students do not bully each other at school or in the presence of school staff. A few administrators and teachers thought that students were too quick to identify actions as racially motivated and were unable to properly define bullying behavior. Some also suggested that bullying was ambiguous and did not require disciplinary action.

“**My students are fairly accepting of other kids. For example, they are accepting of kids in wheelchairs or those with autism. Kids are open-minded and welcoming.**”
Secondary teacher

“**We have adopted an overly sensitive position on racism. Kids call everything racism and bullying.**”
Administrator

“**Kids do not really understand words such as stereotype, racist, and prejudice. They use strong words to refer to each other without understanding the meaning. They are influenced by the media.**”
Secondary teacher

“**Students get along with each other during school time, but the outside time—on social media and on their phones—is where bullying comes out.**”
Secondary teacher

“**There is a transgender student in my class who is accepted by all the other students.**”
Secondary teacher

There are problems with students stereotyping and bullying minorities. Teachers have heard about students making negative stereotypes about Asian students or using the “N” word. A lot of what they hear about and observe is subtle. These things do not typically require disciplinary action, but they do make students feel bad.

Secondary teacher
Moving Forward

This report is intended to inform conversations about school bullying and harassment in the NSD. These are especially important conversations given the harmful impact these behaviors have on students, as well as schools’ responsibility under federal law to protect students from discriminatory harassment.

Promising practices to reduce bullying and harassment include:

**Respond immediately.** When adults intervene to stop bullying and harassment it sends a clear message about what is unacceptable behavior, and it can reduce aggressive behavior over time. Do not expect students to resolve these situations on their own, as this may put targeted students at more risk.

**Provide support.** Let students know that instances of bullying and harassment are not their fault. Listen to the targets of bullying and reassure them that you are there to help and keep them safe. Do not minimize harassment or tell students to ignore bullying behavior.

**Create clear definitions and policies.** Schools can reduce bullying and harassment by creating policies that explicitly outline how students should and should not treat each other. These policies should also include clear consequences for bullying and harassment, as well as training for staff on how to identify bullying and harassment.

**Avoid ineffective strategies.** Exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, do not reduce bullying and harassment. Because bullying and harassment involve an imbalance of power between the perpetrator and the target of the behavior, conflict resolution is an inappropriate strategy and may make targeted students feel unsafe.

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Education Northwest works to transform teaching and learning in the Pacific Northwest and across the nation. Our services to states, districts, schools, community-based organizations, and foundations include rigorous research and evaluation of new and existing programs; research-based technical assistance in areas such as equity, school improvement, and distance learning; widely acclaimed professional development in the fields of literacy and mathematics education; and strategic communications that maximize impact.

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