



Schools Should Prioritize Prevention, Education and Support Over Exclusionary Discipline in Cases of Identity-Based Bullying and Harassment

IDRA Statement by Morgan Craven, J.D. , IDRA National Director of Policy, Advocacy and Community Engagement

(Lubbock, Texas • January 12, 2023) For far too long, students in Texas schools have experienced various forms of racial discrimination, and many educators have felt unprepared to respond to school-based bullying, harassment and discrimination. The Texas Legislature's passage of its classroom censorship law in 2021 did not help. Predictably, the law created fear, confusion and uncertainty around how to talk about race and racism, identity-based harassment and systemic discrimination.

IDRA joined students, families and the Lubbock NAACP in complaints filed to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights to challenge racially discriminatory practices in the two west Texas school districts, Lubbock-Cooper ISD and Slaton ISD.

Last week, both districts issued resolutions asserting their commitment to end racism and discrimination. Unfortunately, some statements focused on the use of exclusionary discipline for harassing behaviors instead of research-based strategies to prevent and effectively address such behaviors.

Racial and other forms of identity-based bullying and harassment are unacceptable and should never be tolerated. IDRA urges all school districts to adopt proven policies and practices rather than resort to ineffective exclusionary discipline.

We know that building the schools young people need requires a multi-pronged approach, including eliminating harmful discipline practices. IDRA has worked in partnership with school districts across the U.S. South to take on issues of harassment and discrimination. Research and our experience clearly show that schools must:

- address the underlying causes of bullying behaviors and community cultures that allow bullying to occur;
- foster inclusive and welcoming classrooms that are free of discrimination; and
- invest in research-based school climate programs, community-school partnerships and instructional practices.

Exclusionary discipline and school policing compromise the safety and rights of individual students and create hostile school environments. These practices undermine important efforts to create welcoming and supportive schools. And they wholly ignore the underlying issues that lead to bullying behaviors, including individual student challenges and trauma, school and community cultures, and school leaders who fail to effectively prevent and intervene in these harmful behaviors.

Schools must end their reliance on suspensions, alternative school placements, police and court intervention, and other discipline strategies that research shows are ineffective and harmful. These approaches can negatively impact the academic and social success of all students. And such actions are disproportionately used against Black students, other students of color, young people with disabilities and LGBTQ+ youth.

When schools use discriminatory discipline practices, they add to the challenging school environments that many young people already face. Students across the country sadly share the common experience of being bullied or harassed by their peers – and sometimes by adults – in their schools based on their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender, gender expression or other personal characteristics. And many feel frustrated when their complaints to school leaders are ignored.

As the students and families in the Lubbock-area districts have shared, sometimes identity-based bullying and harassment and schools' inappropriate disciplinary responses are linked.

Exclusionary discipline is not the answer to bullying, harassment or discrimination, whether that discipline is applied against the young person engaging in the bullying or the young person experiencing the bullying.

While efforts should certainly be taken to ensure the immediate safety of students and adults in schools, relying on harmful exclusionary and punitive tactics as a response to bullying and harassment does not solve the issues that lead to those behaviors.

Nor do these tactics increase school safety, demonstrate effective conflict resolution, or teach anything meaningful to students. Rather they destabilize school communities and may prevent the use of real interventions and supports for students and adults in a school community.

Schools violate the law when they fail to implement meaningful prevention and intervention strategies to stop discriminatory behaviors. State leaders and schools must adopt and follow policies that provide comprehensive training on how to prevent, intervene in, investigate, and respond to identity-based bullying and harassment. IDRA's free technical assistance toolkit, *Interrupting Bullying and Harassment in Schools* (<https://idra.news/webInterrupt>), provides resources to school leaders and policymakers, including research on effective and ineffective strategies.

Other proactive strategies that schools should use to build safe, welcoming and supportive environments for all students include the following.

- **Invest in research-based programs** that foster positive school climates, emphasize relationship-building, and hold students and adults accountable for harmful behaviors in an effective and age-appropriate way. Such programs include [restorative practices](#) and positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). These programs and frameworks should be implemented with fidelity, monitored with thorough and frequent data collection, and adjusted where appropriate to meet community needs.
- **Implement comprehensive school policies** that include educator training on [culturally-sustaining educational practices, which](#) enables teachers to create classroom environments where all aspects of students' identities are affirmed, respected and celebrated. IDRA's [School Resource Hub – We All Belong](#) provides lesson plans for teaching about race, culture and history in responsible, engaging ways.
- **Build deep and authentic connections** between families, community-based advocates and organizations and schools. Strategies like IDRA's [Family Leadership in Education](#) model enable all members of a school community to participate in education a meaningful way.

We know educators and the communities of Lubbock-Cooper and Slaton ISDs care about their students and are dedicated to providing them the best education possible. Educators need support and capacity building to thrive in safe and culturally-sustaining schools that serve all students.

Citations

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Resources

Classroom Censorship Hurts Students, web page

https://www.idra.org/education_policy/classroom-censorship-hurts-students/

IDRA's Knowledge is Power – national resource for educators and advocates for equity and excellence in education in the midst of classroom censorship policies <https://www.idra.org/services/knowledge-is-power>

IDRA's School Resource Hub – We All Belong, website. <http://idraseen.org/hub>

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