



Addressing Harassment and Discrimination in our Schools: Eight Things Every SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER Should Know

- **Many students in Maine experience harassment and discrimination that affects their education.** Harassment, exclusion, and unequal opportunities because of race, religion, and national origin are common in Maine schools. Our report documents similar experiences across the state.
- **Schools have a legal responsibility to address harassment and discrimination.** The prevalence of discrimination in Maine schools and the lack of sufficient anti-bullying policies are violations of federal and state law. Under Maine law, schools have a legal obligation to investigate and address discrimination based on national origin, race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and gender. Those that fail to do so open themselves up to investigations to the Maine Human Rights Commission, lawsuits by students, and prosecution by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice.
- **School boards can be leaders in addressing these problems.** School boards play an important role in determining the culture of a school, establishing policies and procedures to address discrimination, and allocating resources for programs that support vulnerable students. Several successful efforts to do so are outlined in our report.
- **Many immigrants receive an education that is inferior to that of their peers.** Students of color and immigrant students experience discrimination due to official and unofficial school policies and practices, as well as bullying and harassment. This can affect school attendance, performance, mental health, and access to quality education. As a result, minority students often receive an inferior education to that of their white, non-immigrant peers.
- **Schools with fewer immigrants are not immune to this problem.** Some schools with smaller percentages of immigrant students and students of color have more severe problems with harassment. They also tend to have fewer programs to serve those vulnerable students. Schools

with less diversity may also have more entrenched ideas about what constitutes “normal,” which can be harmful to minority students. For all these reasons, schools should not wait for a sudden or massive influx of immigrants to begin considering how best to serve minority students.

- **Even school districts with appropriate policies in place often fall short of their obligations.** Two challenges identified in our report are denial and/or unawareness of discrimination in schools, and limited resources to address it. Even if schools have anti-bullying policies in place, they may not be fulfilling their obligation to protect students. It is crucial for schools to take a proactive approach to investigating and eradicating bullying, and to correcting school cultures that are hostile to minority students.
- **Parents/guardians are a vital part of students’ success in school.** Outreach to parents and guardians make a significant impact. It is important to keep parent figures informed of school expectations, students’ progress, and available resources. In our research, school administrators and teachers often lamented that they are struggling to get parents, especially immigrant parents, involved. Our report details the barriers that keep these parents from getting involved, and offers examples of successful ways some schools have increased parental engagement.
- **There are low-cost, low-barrier ways to address these problems.** Our report documents several programs around the state that have been successful at helping schools meet the needs of all their students, without significantly disrupting academics or costing a lot of money.

For more information, go to www.aclumaine.org/webelonghere.