

WE BELONG HERE: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I. OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

This report explores the experiences of students in schools across Maine who have diverse racial, cultural, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds. Drawing on interviews with over 115 people (students, parents, community leaders, educators, and administrators), we outline the discrimination faced by minority students in Maine.

We also describe the programs some schools have implemented to address inequality. Our focus is on successful programs from around the state that could be adopted more widely.

This report draws on interviews with over 115 students, parents and educators. We hope it will serve as a tool for communities to achieve greater equity in their schools.

Data is primarily drawn from four categories:

- School districts with the highest percentages of English Language Learner (ELL) and non-white students
- Schools that have seen the largest recent increases in these two categories
- Schools where students reached out to us to share their concerns
- Schools whose successful programs warrant special attention.

Those include Auburn, Bangor, Belfast, Biddeford, Calais, Gardiner, Gorham, Lewiston, MSAD 37 (Addison, Columbia, Columbia Falls, Harrington, and Milbridge), Portland, South Portland, and Westbrook.

Our research focused on immigrant students.

As a result, this report is primarily focused on students who experience discrimination because of their race, religion, national origin, or status as an English Language Learner.

However, the kinds of harassment and exclusion that immigrants and students of color face are also experienced by LGBTQ students, students with disabilities, and low-income students. Many of the best practices we identify here could also serve to improve the experiences of those students.

We hope this report will serve as a tool for students, families, and educators to achieve greater equity in their schools.

II. FINDINGS

Our research has uncovered harassment and discrimination in schools across the state and at all grade levels. Many students of color face a constant barrage of bullying, as well as unwelcoming school cultures.

Muslim students described other students pushing them in the hallways, calling them terrorists, and trying to pull off their headscarves. Students of color described white students telling them to “go back to Mexico” or threatening to have them deported. One black student described students she didn’t know reaching out and tugging her hair as she walked through school hallways. Hateful speech, including racial epithets and derogatory terms for immigrants and sexual minorities, is common.

Both open harassment and more subtle forms of bias are also exhibited by teachers and other staff. A Somali student described a teacher who would always give out bathroom passes to white students first. A black student talked about a math teacher who would always double check the answers he gave with a white student, but who wouldn’t do the same with white students’ answers.

Discrimination extends beyond the classroom, too. Several immigrant families described bus drivers who refused to pick up their children, or complained to school administrators that the immigrant children smelled bad and had bad attitudes. One mother described a school bus driver encouraging the other children to taunt her child.

A Muslim high school student was told by a soccer referee that she couldn’t play unless she removed her headscarf. Another Muslim student was told by the swim coach she couldn’t join the team because she wanted to wear leggings with her bathing suit. These actions are not only offensive; they also violate federal and state laws.

One of the most significant racial disparities in schools is discipline. Black students are more likely to experience in-school and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, referrals to law enforcement, and corporal punishment than their white counterparts, for the same behaviors.

THE PREVALENCE OF DISCRIMINATION IN MAINE SCHOOLS IS NOT ONLY A MORAL ISSUE. IT IS ALSO A VIOLATION OF STATE AND FEDERAL LAW.

Students often feel that their concerns about harassment are not taken seriously. They say teachers and administrators treat each incident as an isolated episode, rather than as part of a broader, problematic school culture. Ultimately, these students conclude that the adults in their school don’t care about discrimination, and may even condone it. As one Muslim student explained, “A lot of us have lost trust in the school, because no one did anything. I used to go to them every day, but they never did anything.”

The prevalence of discrimination in Maine schools and the lack of sufficient anti-bullying policies are moral failures, and they are also violations of federal and state law. Under Maine law, “[a]ll students have the right to attend public schools that are safe, secure and peaceful environments.” Schools have a legal obligation to 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.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

We have structured the recommendations section of our report around programs focused on three areas: educator and school community awareness; equity in access and outcomes; and parent and family outreach. For each of these areas we outline the problem identified and describe some of the successful programs that Maine schools have implemented to address that problem.

Because some of the most problematic interactions arise out of ignorance, cultural competency trainings and workshops about race are vital to improving equity in schools.

Programs that we highlight include professional development workshops for teachers focused on the history of race in America and its implications for education; activities that build community among students with different backgrounds; story-telling projects; and efforts to collect and analyze data to better understand student resources and needs.

We also highlight programs that seek to correct the inequities experienced by students of color.

Those include academic support, alternative approaches to discipline, increasing diversity in the teaching workforce, and services to meet basic needs.

Finally, we highlight programs that empower immigrant parents and families.

Families are a crucial part of students' success in school. To best support their children, parents and guardians must be kept informed of school expectations, students' progress, and available resources. We describe best practices for engaging immigrant parents, including providing interpreters, offering information sessions geared toward immigrants, accommodating work schedules and transportation needs, and including them in school decision-making processes.

The discrimination documented in this report is alarming.

No person, and certainly no child, should feel as vulnerable, excluded, and victimized as many immigrant students in Maine described feeling on a regular basis.

But there is reason to hope.

Our conversations with immigrant families were a reminder of the strength and resilience of young people, and the unceasing love and dedication of parents. We found passionate educators all over the state who are committed to improving their schools. They shared their challenges and successes in the hope that this report might be the foundation of a better experience for all students in Maine.

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EDUCATORS SHARED THEIR
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