



STAND UP TO HATE



BULLYING AGAINST BLACK STUDENTS

In 2023, the Beloit Memorial High School basketball team found a scary sight in the locker room of Muskego High School. Someone had drawn swastikas, the N-word, and other racist language on the lockers. Students at Muskego, a mostly white school, had also dressed in masks and costumes. Many thought these costumes showed offensive images of Black people. No one could prove the graffiti was directed at the students from Beloit, but many students and parents were upset.

Young people are far more likely to understand the impact of racism in America than their parents and grandparents. Despite this, racist bullying and hate crimes committed by young people persist.



Black students have alleged racial bullying in schools across Wisconsin from Kiel to Chippewa Falls to Cedarburg. Too often, students and parents say, schools have not done enough to address racial bullying before it gets worse.

In the late 2000s, a high school in Monona, Wisconsin saw a prolonged campaign of harassment against Black students. A gang called "The Hicks Clan" had formed among several white high school students. These students dressed in camo, flew Confederate flags, and taunted Black students. In the end, a white student was caught placing a deer carcass on top of a black student's car. Another white student was arrested for harassing two women of color as they drove on the highway.

There is growing concern about White Supremacists recruiting young people. The internet, gaming platforms, and social media make it easy for small White Supremacist groups to extend their reach.

White Supremacist Bullying

Fond Du Lac, 1995

The events described here are eerily reminiscent of those that unfolded in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin in the mid-1990s. In late 1995, racist and antisemitic leaflets were found delivered to many homes around the city. The literature appeared to be from a White Supremacist group that claimed to have headquarters in Fond du Lac. The local police chief explained to the media at the time that there was nothing illegal about distributing literature, and unless the literature "incited violence" there was nothing police could do. But in the following months, locals would see more evidence of the White Supremacist group around town. Later that Spring, a group of young white men would storm the porch of a local home and assault a group of Black and Latino youth. Police arrested nine young white men that evening, confiscating a knife, a pipe, shotgun shells, and cards identifying them as members of a White Supremacist gang. When they were arrested, the youth celebrated their membership in the organization.

One of the men arrested that day was a 19-year-old named Steven Timothy Snyder. Police suspected that he was a recruiter for the White Supremacist organization targeting youth in the community. Years later, Snyder would again make headlines in Fond du Lac after robbing a bank and killing a police officer.

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Loneliness, stress, and normal developmental changes can make young people quite vulnerable.

Parents, teachers, and police struggle to respond. Many want to protect the right young people have to read and explore ideas, and freedom of speech. And it is normal for young people to test new identities, beliefs, and social groups. But young people cannot easily leave White Supremacist groups once they join. These groups isolate people, provide people with new friends, and push them to engage in illegal and risky acts.

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Adults can't punish young people for what they might believe. But they also can't ignore the warning signs. And the impact of racist bullying on Black youth and other youth of color is clear. When schools no longer feel safe, learning, social life, and mental health can all suffer. White Supremacist and other racist bullying can harm youth for years to come.

One Black student who was bullied at his high school in Kiel said he first tried to ignore his feelings. "You just kind of go along with it and laugh it off, otherwise you're the bad guy," he told a local newspaper. "It's not right, but people here aren't used to being around African Americans, or even different ethnicities." But the bullying got so bad that he applied to change schools. In his request, he wrote: "I don't want to continue to go to school in Kiel because I feel like I don't belong... Please don't make me sacrifice even more in order to go to a school that doesn't single me out based on my race."

More About Bullying in Wisconsin

Unfortunately, bullying is a common part of school life in Wisconsin and across the country. According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, "Bullying is unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance. The behavior is repeated, or has the potential to be repeated, over time." Bullying can be physical (e.g. hitting, kicking), verbal (e.g. name-calling, threatening), or social/relational (e.g. purposeful exclusion, spreading rumors) and can occur in person or electronically."

According to recent surveys, nearly 1 out of every 5 high school students in Wisconsin reports that they have been bullied. While bullying affects all groups, the power imbalance discussed here makes some people more vulnerable than others. High school girls are more likely to be bullied than boys, and LGBTQ students are more likely to be bullied than heterosexual students.

As with hate crimes, sometimes teachers and local school leaders share the same biases as their students and ignore bullying. That is why the state Department of Public Instruction has its own resources to recognize and respond to bullying.

Learn more at:
<https://dpi.wi.gov/families-students/health-safety/bullying>

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