

# Coeur d'Alene School District Middle and High Schools: **Summary of Report on Social Climate & Student Focus Groups**

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14 Page Report

**WARNING** – This report contains examples of statements from students that contain offensive language. If you are considering sharing this with children, it is recommended parents read the report first in its entirety.

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## I. Introduction

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### The Author Based this Report on the Following Information:

In October 2013 I spent a week conducting focus groups with Middle and High school students, parents, teachers, administrators and others to assess the social climate relating to bias, harassment and bullying at the middle and high schools in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

During the week I conducted 34 focus groups with 294 students, two focus groups with 42 parents, two focus groups with approximately one hundred teachers, one focus group with twelve principals and other school administrators, and one focus group with seven School Resource Officers (SROs). In total over 450 people attended the focus groups.

In each school I conducted between two and seven focus groups. Each group lasted approximately one hour. The focus groups were structured to include students who shared an important trait such as gender, race and grade level. I structure the groups in this way because, in my experience, students are far more comfortable and candid in talking about certain issues if they are with others from the same group. For example, students of color are more willing to discuss issues of racial bias when they are in a group with other students of color. In each focus group students discussed their views and experiences relating to school climate, both about the issues they had in common with those in the group but also about issues affecting others.

### **Qualitative Research on Bias, Degrading Language, Harassment, Teasing and Bullying**

For over twenty years I have engaged in studies of bias, harassment, bullying and violence through focus groups and interviews. Qualitative research based on interviews and focus groups is an accepted form of social science research. Quantitative research through surveys and questionnaires is the other most common form of research on issues of social climate. Both approaches are accepted within social science. Both approaches have their benefits and their limitations. Quantitative research can provide an accurate picture of the frequency of different types of conduct (such as students' use of degrading language on different topics) but has difficulty providing a vivid picture of either the content of bias and harassment or the impact of bias on those who are targeted. Qualitative research provides a vivid picture of bias and its impact but cannot measure the frequency of incidents with the same accuracy as survey data.

I use qualitative research because I find most people appreciate, value and remember the accounts told by focus group participants. Moreover, some people have a difficult time understanding or recalling statistical data from quantitative research.

Several years ago I conducted scores of focus groups in one school system with twenty- eight elementary, middle and secondary schools. At the same time a researcher used surveys and questionnaires in conducting quantitative research. Not surprisingly (but reassuringly to us both), we reached similar conclusions about the level and content of bias and harassment among students in the schools.

### **Greater Consistency Verses Differences**

In my work in schools across the United States and in Europe I see far greater consistency in the issues faced by schools (from Coeur d'Alene to Belfast, Northern Ireland, to affluent suburban school in New England, to small rural schools in Maine) than I see differences.

Examples of student comments are bulleted and in "quotations" – the only changes made to the student comments are redacted pieces of information within a statement that may identify the student or specific situation.

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## **II. Middle Schools**

I conducted a total of thirteen focus groups with 147 students in Canfield Middle School, Lakes Magnet Middle School and Woodland Middle School.

### **A. Bias, Degrading Language, Harassment and Bullying**

#### **1. Gender**

Both boys and girls described frequent use by boys of sexually degrading language about girls in general and also toward particular girls. Students also reported that girls often use some of the same words toward other girls. Girls also said that they see girls excluding specific girls from a group of friends in school or on social media. Boys and girls have seen many examples of inappropriate touching of girls by boys.

- "The boys say you are such a slut and bitch, go kill yourself, skank, c#nt."
- "A boy hugged me from behind. He slid his hands towards my crotch. I tried to wiggle out of his arms but he was holding me so hard I couldn't get him off."

Girls described how this behavior affected them emotionally.

- "Knowing that when I go to school every day I am going to see things like that makes me feel scared and hurt. They have no idea what it is like to be a girl at this age."

## 2. Race

Students hear racial slurs and stereotypes frequently about black people, Asians and Hispanics. They hear slurs and stereotypes about Native Americans with less frequency. In nine focus groups in the three middle schools 81 of the 96 students hear the word “nigger” said by white students.

- “Playing soccer a kid said get out of my way black ass and they shoved a student to the ground.”
- “An Asian friend of mine was bullied last year. He was told to ‘go home’ and was called a wonton.”

Students of color wrote about the impact of racial bias.

- “I fake being sick sometimes just so I don’t have to hear those words. It is hard and I think that I will be very sad if I hear any of the words again.”

White students wrote about how they felt about hearing racial bias at school.

- “When people say mean things about black people, I feel like they shouldn’t because we are all humans.”

## 3. Religion

Students hear negative comments, stereotypes and jokes about people who belong to different religions. The greatest number of these comments is about Jews and particularly among some 8th grade classes. Students hear comments about Mormons and Muslims with some frequency. Comments about Christians, atheists and Jehovah’s Witnesses are heard least often.

- “Someone said to a Jewish student, it’s your fault that Jesus died.”
- “Students give the Nazi salute.”
- “One day a person made fun of a Christian because he said, I don’t believe in God but if you believe in him and that made up fairy tail stuff. Why aren’t you in a mental class right now?”

## 4. Disability

Students described the use of negative language about kids with disabilities and at times the use of this language directly to students with disabilities. Students also describe seeing students pretend to be friends with students with disabilities for the purpose of making fun of them. 60 of the 98 students in the nine focus groups said they had seen students pretend to be friends with disabled students.

- “One of my friends pretended to be friends with a disabled kid. When the disabled student left, she mimicked the kid’s limp.”
- “I saw a boy go up to someone with a disability and flat out tell them they were retarded. It makes me feel bad for them.”

Students also described positive interaction between students & students who have disabilities.

- “My friend offered to help this woman with her disabled kid for the day.”
- “I saw a boy help a disabled person to lunch.”

## 5. Sexual Orientation

Students frequently hear degrading words about lesbian, gay and bisexual people, including that’s so gay, faggot, queer, homo, lesbo and dyke. Students also hear comments that refer to or invoke religion, such as “gays are going to hell” and “God doesn’t approve of gays.”

- “There was a boy who was gay. All his friends were female. He was talked about behind his back and to his face. He cut himself on the wrists and arms.”

Students wrote about how degrading words about gay, lesbian & bisexual people make them feel.

- “It doesn’t make me feel good because I have relatives who are gay.”

## 6. Weight and Size

Students hear many words about students who weigh more than others and also those who weigh less: giant, toothpick, tubby, Sasquatch, fat, lard a\*\*, and shut up and go eat Twinkies.

- “A girl is bullied by people who call her whale and other names – the bullying really brings her down.”
- “A boy in PE was called fat when we were running. He was walking and people tried to push him into a run but he fell down. Everybody laughed.”

## 7. Social Media

A number of students see inappropriate and hurtful use of social media. A significant portion of these incidents are targeted at girls, both by boys and by other girls.

- “Somebody told this girl that she was ugly and should hang herself; so she cut her wrists.”
- “A girl put a picture of a whale and a pig on this girl’s Facebook page and said, these are your sisters.”

## 8. Socio-Economic Status

Students talked and wrote about economic bias both toward people with less money and people with more money.

- “People say about my family; how are you affording lunch? Why are you on free lunch? I felt embarrassed. My dad still doesn’t have a job.”

- “I have been bullied because my family has a house, a condo and a houseboat.”

## 9. Social Outcasts

Student described the characteristics of students who are “social outcasts:” smart, poor, not as smart, students who try so hard to fit in that they are annoying, Emos, people who express themselves differently, kids who have bad teeth, big ears or other physical differences.

- “Somebody who is different. People spread rumors about them and make up jokes that would really hurt the person they are about. People quit talking to that person and tell others not to talk to them.”
- “People who like someone of the same sex or are bisexual are considered outcasts because they are different. It is something they don’t see every day.”

### **B. Impact of Bias and Degrading Language on Students**

The students wrote about the impact of bias, degrading language, exclusion, teasing and bullying.

- “There is a kid who is mentally disabled so people laugh at him. He understands enough and knows that people are laughing. He is always sad.”
- “My friend was always being called zit face, sh\*t head, slut, c#nt. She would get physically beaten up. She went into a major depression and her grades dropped. Her self-esteem went down too.”

### **C. Positive Actions by Students**

Coeur d’Alene middle school students are speaking up and intervening on behalf of classmates.

- “There is this shy girl on my bus. Someone pushed her off a seat and I told them to leave her alone and saved her my seat while I went and sat with my friend.”
- One time a girl said; “Hey. That is not very nice.” She said to treat people how you want to be treated. She asked “Would you like me to do that to you?” and they stopped.

### **D. Teachers**

Students wrote about teachers creating a respectful school climate.

- “Mrs. \_\_\_ is very good at [dealing with bullying] because she takes it very seriously. She gives advice and tells you how to prevent it.”
- “My teacher is very great because he is always finding new ways to prevent bullying. He tells us we can come to him whenever we need. I came to him this year because I knew I could trust him.”

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### III. High Schools

I conducted thirteen focus groups with a total of 144 students at Coeur d'Alene, Lake City and Venture high schools.

#### A. Bias, Degrading Language, Harassment and Bullying

##### 1. Sexually Degrading Language and Conduct Used by Boys

Students hear boys say the following words: slut, whore, c\*nt, ho, ratchet, skank, stupid, ugly and weak. Students hear these words spoken generally about girls. They also hear these words about and at times said directly to a particular girl. Students see boys touch or slap girls' butts and also, but with less frequency, girls' breasts. A number of students said that they had seen boys push a girl up against a locker in a way that was scary.

- "A guy told everyone he had slept with this girl and everyone believed it. It was hard for her to get everyone to change their minds. It affected her relationship with her boyfriend and her guy friends."
- "There was a girl who was being pushed. She was scared but I stopped it. I see ass or boob grabbing and flicking vaginas."

Girls wrote about the impact of this language and touching.

- "I would see guys grab girls' butts, boobs and everything. It makes you feel degraded, put down and like you are just a piece of meat."
- "Coming to school seeing and hearing derogatory words feels like the worst thing because so many people act like it is normal."

##### 2. Race

Students wrote about racial slurs, jokes and comments. They hear more comments about African Americans than about Asians and Hispanics.

- "Someone wrote nigger in my book today. I am biracial."
- "Hispanics are drug dealers."

Students of color wrote about the impact of racial bias.

- "I know someone who has been severely depressed because she doesn't want to be seen as a stereotype. She wants to be seen for herself, not the color of her skin."

- “Knowing that there are people who use those jokes and words hurts. Some kids just take it too far and it hurts. It makes you feel unwanted and because you are different, there is something wrong with you.”

### 3. Religion

Students describe comments about Jews and also about Mormons.

- “Jews are said to rip you off. Don’t Jew me.”
- “Mormons are overpopulating. They need to just die.”

### 4. Disability

Many students see classmates who pretend to be friends with someone with a disability but really are trying to make fun of or humiliate the disabled student. Students hear the word retard and also Downs, as a shortened version of Down’s syndrome.

- “Mentally disabled kids are urged by some of the football players and popular kids to do funny things like dance or tell stories that exploit their disability. This happens frequently at lunch.”
- “After lunch one day a popular kid shoulder checked a disabled kid and he fell on the ground.”

Students also discussed positive actions by students toward students with disabilities.

- “Sometimes if someone has a disability other people treat them with kindness. They will use manners and talk to them and laugh with them. Sometimes I see disabled kids getting high fives from people in the hall or at lunch. Also, people will say hello to them and tell them to have a good day.”

### 5. Sexual Orientation

Students frequently, many of them daily, hear negative words about gays and lesbians: that’s so gay, faggot, queer, homo, lesbo and dyke. In a focus group with student mentors everyone said that they would be worried about the emotional safety of a friend who came out as gay or lesbian in their high school.

- “There was a gay student last year. Almost everybody called him a fag every day.”
- “A girl came out that she was gay. She lost all of her friends and was shunned from her church.”

### 6. Weight and Size

Students often, many of them daily, hear negative words about people who are considered large: fat, cow, tank, hippo, obese and husky. Students wrote about comments or incidents in their schools.

- “Dude, that chick cannot even fit in the desk.” The girl overheard the student say it about herself.



- “Boys make comments about how girls look anorexic because they are skinny or how they have rolls because they are chubby. Or their breast size and butt shape gets commented on.”

## 7. Other Kinds of Degrading Language, Bias, Harassment and Bullying

### **Social Media**

Girls commented that degrading messages on social media were a particularly serious problem between girls. Students have seen messages like: go kill yourself, go to hell you ugly piece of sh\*t.

- “When I broke up with my boyfriend his new girl friend sent me an email saying, “you are a loser and should kill yourself.”
- “I was cyber bullied when I was asked about my faith. A girl messaged me ‘go fu\*k yourself.’”

### **Socio-Economic Status**

Students describe negative comments about whether certain students came from poor or well off families.

- “If you wear nice clothes people will call you stuck up and snotty.”
- “I was told that I wasn’t good enough because my family didn’t have as much money as their families.”

### **Social Outcasts**

- “There is always this one kid who sits alone outside school. I think he is an outcast and has no friends.”
- “She was a social outcast. She sat alone and never talked because she was socially awkward and everyone made fun of her. She dropped out.”

## **B. Impact of Bias and Degrading Language on Students**

Students wrote about the impact of bias, harassment and bullying on themselves or someone they know.

- “I know a girl who was constantly called a slut and a whore. She went home every night and cried. She eventually stopped coming to school because I think she felt like she was a target for harassment. She failed all of her classes and feels like she has failed at life because of how other people have treated her.”
- My friend started cutting herself because of kids at school talking about her race and where she came from. This has put her in depression and caused her to become a different person completely. I talk to this girl every time I see her to make sure she knows that at last someone is there for her who cares.”

- “I know a boy who was constantly made fun of because they were bigger and had many rumors spread about them. People would say he was gay even though he was not. The boy eventually started believing these rumors and things that were said about him. To cope with the pain he would try to cut himself and eat out because of his emotions.”

### **C. Positive Actions**

Students described positive incidents of students speaking up for respect and civility.

- “There is one student I’ve known since my freshman year who has a disability. Everyone has treated him with a complete respect and we all help him out during the classes we have with him and at lunch. We basically make him feel normal.”
- “Some boy was walking in the hallway and saw a girl getting called a racial name. He told the bully to knock it off and he helped to cheer that girl up.”

### **D. Teachers**

Students wrote about teachers who work to create safe and respectful schools.

- A teacher said, “We will never downgrade anyone in this class.”
- I have had teachers that absolutely will not stand for any kind of bullying. They do a good job.
- Miss \_\_\_ told the whole class a personal story to show that race, as a prejudice is a real problem.

## **IV. Adult Focus Groups**

I met with two groups of teachers, one from the middle schools and the other from the high schools. I met with eight principals and assistant principals from elementary, middle and high schools.

I met with seven School Resource Officers. The SROs identified the most significant issues of degrading language, harassment and bullying in the use or abuse of social media.

I held two voluntary parent information sessions and met with twelve parents of high school students and thirty parents of middle school students.

All of the above adult groups provided important insights into issues of bias and harassment and the barriers that exist to changing school culture.

Coeur d'Alene is very fortunate to have teachers, parents, administrators and School Resource Officers who are committed to creating schools that are as safe and respectful as possible. Their commitment is a critically important asset for reducing degrading language and empowering students to become leaders.

## V. Conclusions and Recommendations

This report details serious issues with bias, degrading language and conduct, harassment and bullying. Notwithstanding this data, I am optimistic about the ability of the Coeur d'Alene's middle and high schools to create schools, which are as safe and respectful for every child as is possible. The reasons for my optimism are many.

- The Superintendent and other central office administrators have shown a remarkably high level of commitment to learning what issues exist and to taking steps to address those issues. Several of these steps will begin in early February when I return to Coeur d'Alene.
- The school principals and their key staff have demonstrated a similar high level of commitment to addressing issues of bias, harassment and bullying.
- The quality of the teachers in the middle and high schools was evident from the significant number of instances described by students of teachers who were doing an excellent job of addressing bias, harassment and bullying. Moreover, in the large focus group sessions with teachers they demonstrated their commitment to protecting the physical and emotional safety of students and a keen analysis of the barriers to effective response and prevention.
- The parents who attended the two evening meetings similarly were thoughtful and probing in their identification of barriers.

The four reasons which I have described above are necessary components to changing the social culture of schools. But support from adults is not sufficient to accomplish that change alone.

Schools cannot succeed in significantly improving response and prevention without partnering with students. The most important reason for this is that the vast majority of incidents described in this report occurred outside of the eyesight or hearing of adults. Empowering students to speak up on behalf of other students who are targeted is critical and essential to any successful effort to respond to and prevent bias, harassment and bullying.

I am optimistic about the ability of Coeur d'Alene middle and high schools to become a district that others will point to as a model for response and prevention. This optimism is rooted in the qualities I saw in the 294 students I met with. Below are some of those qualities.

- Students in many focus groups described their feeling of disgust at how students from other groups were being treated. Students described their reactions to the targeting of disabled students, students of color, Jewish students, and gay, lesbian and bisexual students.
- Students' empathy for the targets of bias, harassment and bullying was remarkably high. The ability of students to write about the impact of bias on their classmates was impressive.
- Students' descriptions of themselves and others speaking up for targeted students and respectfully confronting those who use degrading language and conduct are equally impressive.

- Most students have faith in their teachers. That so many students were able to describe positive actions by teachers in response and prevention is both a strong endorsement of the quality of Coeur d'Alene's faculty and also a strong sign that students are thoughtful and positive about their schools.
- Students while being overall positive about their teachers were able to identify particular areas that concerned them. Student described their perception that some teachers favor girls over boys, give athletes advantages in class, and do not always respond effectively to racial issues that arise in class. These perceptions did not lead students to condemn faculty as a whole. It takes thoughtful and intelligent students to engage in such discerning analysis.

Lastly, I enjoyed Coeur d'Alene's middle and high school students. They took a keen interest in the focus groups and more importantly in being part of a process that could increase the physical and emotional safety of students. The responses of middle school students to my question of whether the focus groups were a good idea were overwhelmingly positive for one reason, that the focus groups can help students, teachers and administrators reduce bias, harassment and bullying.

## **Issues of Concern**

### **• Gender - Girls**

- Degrading Language - The use by boys of sexually degrading language about and toward girls is at a high level in both high schools and middle schools.
- Inappropriate Touching - The use by boys toward girls of inappropriate sexual touching is at a high level in both middle and high schools. A number of these incidents appear to involve criminal sexual assault or physical assault.

### **• Gender - Boys**

Boys in both middle and high schools perceive that teachers are favoring girls both in imposing discipline and in recognizing students during class instruction.

### **• Race**

The level of use by white students in middle and high school of racial slurs, stereotypes and jokes is high, particularly comments about black people.

### **• Religion**

The use by students of degrading comments, jokes and stereotypes, particularly in middle schools, is high.

### **• Disability**

The level of degrading language in middle and high schools expressed directly to disabled students is high.

### **• Sexual Orientation**

The use of language that is degrading to or about people who are lesbian, gay and bisexual is widespread in middle and high schools.

- **Social Media**

The use of social media in disturbing and hurtful ways, particularly in middle schools, is high.

- **Socio-Economic Status**

Students in middle and high schools hear frequent negative comments about the socio-economic status of others, both because their families have little money and because their families are affluent.

- **Body Size**

The use of degrading language about students who are larger or weigh more than others is common in both middle and high school.

- **Impact of Bias and Degrading Language**

Students in middle and high schools wrote many descriptions of the destructive impact of bias and degrading language and conduct. This conduct negatively affects the emotional well being of students and their ability to succeed academically.

## **Recommendations**

### **1. Peer Leadership Programs for Students**

Empowering students to move from being passive bystanders of bias and degrading language to speaking up about the importance of civility and respect is a critical step in changing school climate. I recommend two approaches to increasing peer leadership, both of which will begin when I am in Coeur d'Alene in the first week in February.

- a. Student Leadership Workshops

Training educators and community members to lead half-day or full-day peer leadership workshops is particularly effective because it build the internal capacity within the school district to continue this work from year to year.

- b. Respect Teams

Creating teams in each middle and high school of students who care about the social climate of their schools is an effective way to harness student leadership, creativity and projects to assist in creating as respectful climate as possible.

### **2. Conflict Resolution Dialogues**

The high schools should implement for this year and/or next school year a program of conflict resolution dialogues relating to gender, race and religion.

### **3. Efforts to Reduce the Impact of Bias and Degrading Language**

The middle and high schools should develop a program, in coordination with the Respect Teams, to increase the positive messages given to students about the groups that are the target of degrading language and stereotypes.

#### **4. Workshops for Faculty and Staff on Response and Prevention**

Faculty should be provided with half-day workshops on skills and strategies for responding to bias, degrading language and harassment both in the hallways and in the classrooms.

#### **5. Addressing Inappropriate Touching**

The School Department and the Police Department should work together to develop strategies to increase the sanctions for inappropriate touching and at the same time to educate boys and girls about both the harm of this conduct and the laws relating to assault and sexual assault.

#### **6. Addressing Anti-Jewish Bias and Degrading Language**

The School District and the middle schools should further examine the possible roots of significant levels of anti-Jewish language and conduct in middle schools. The teaching of the Holocaust and other significant world events are taught in middle school curriculum may present opportunities for reducing this language.

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