

Students are fed up with racist slurs and bullying. Now they're walking out of class



Students and community members joined Brittany Tichenor- Cox, center, during a vigil in North Salt Lake, Utah, last month as she mourned the death of her daughter Isabella "Izzy." The girl's family said she died by suicide after being repeatedly bullied at her Davis County school for being Black and autistic.

(CNN) — Some Black students are being told they stink while others are being called monkeys by their White peers. The n-word has been written on the walls of school restrooms as other students are the targets of racist rants on social media.

Students of color are facing racial slurs and bullying in and

outside the classroom, and many who are fed up have been walking out of class, speaking at board meetings and even suing school districts.

In Minnesota, a 14-year-old Black girl spoke in front of a crowd to condemn [a video widely shared online](#) that she said encouraged her to take her own life. Meanwhile, a community in Utah is scrutinizing a school district after the family of a Black and autistic student said she was [bullied by classmates before dying by suicide](#).

As some lawmakers and parents attempt to [limit teachings about racism](#) and schools' diversity and inclusion efforts are met with protests, numerous reports of racist bullying have recently surfaced in classrooms from coast to coast.



"It's everywhere, it's not a new thing. This isn't something that is just now happening. It's just now getting attention, more than it has (gotten) before," Sean Sorkoram,

a high school student in Tigard, Oregon, who was part of a walkout on Wednesday, told [CNN affiliate KPTV](#).

Students at [Tigard High School](#) staged the walkout in protest of a video posted on social media that appears to show students using racial slurs. In October, the Tigard-Tualatin School District said reports of hate speech

incidents were rising in its schools.

"Students are reporting that they have been the victim of hate speech or observed firsthand hate incidents happening in our buildings," Superintendent Sue Rieke-Smith wrote in [a message to parents](#).

In a [new report](#) released last week, the [Government Accountability Office](#) estimated that 5.2 million students aged 12 to 18 were bullied in the 2018-2019 school year and one in four of them experienced bullying related to their race, national origin, religion, disability, gender or sexual orientation.

In the same school year, the report says, there were 1.6 million students who were subjected to hate speech due to their identity. Among those incidents, half targeted students' race and 24% related to their national origin.

The agency found that while students experience a range of hostile behaviors, hate is widespread in schools. More than 1,500 schools reported having at least one hate crime occur and about 5.8 million students said they saw hate words or symbols written at schools. That included anti-Semitic slurs, references to lynching, the Holocaust, and anti-immigrant rhetoric, the report indicates.

Students are protesting and seeking legal action

Dozens of students attended protests and solidarity events in Minnesota last month after a racist video was shared widely on social media. In that video, [a young girl is seen spewing hateful, racist slurs toward a Black high school student](#), encouraging her to take her own life.

Nya Sigin, a 14-year-old student at Prior Lake High School, told CNN last month that she was the target of the video, which is now being investigated by police in Savage, Minnesota. The investigation was launched after the girl's older sister and multiple students from several schools reported it to school officials.

Savage Police Chief Rodney Seurer has described the video as a horrific, hateful and racist, saying such behavior won't be tolerated in the city.



Nya Sign, 14, spoke at a protest outside her school in Savage, Minnesota and condemned the video she says targeted her.

Chioma Osuoha, a student activist who led a solidarity event with the girl and students who have been victims of racial incidents, told CNN her "heart dropped" and she was "so angry" when she first watched the video. It led her to start working to bring attention to the video and she contacted the girl.

Since the video began drawing local and national attention, there has been an outpouring of support from students and community members outraged by the video, something that Osuoha says shows that many people are willing to have discussions about race and learn how to become allies.

"The power is in the people, we must do things in numbers and (I) believe that's exactly what happened," Osuoha, 18, said.



In Michigan, the parents of a 15-year-old Black student filed a \$150 million class-action federal lawsuit against school officials on her behalf days after [several students protested](#) over their school district's response to [racist messages being plastered on school walls](#).

The lawsuit, filed last month in US District Court, argues Black students and their parents "have experienced racist, unfair, hurtful, and at times dangerous interactions" at Bloomfield Hills High School by both White staff and students. District officials, the lawsuit argues, have failed to take steps to stop racial discrimination.

In a statement, the Bloomfield Hills Schools district declined to comment on "the specifics of pending litigation."

"Most importantly, irrespective of any legal filings, the topic of equity and inclusion will continue to be a top priority for Bloomfield Hills Schools, as it has for the past several years. The district will emerge stronger and better as a result of these conversations, undeterred from its commitment to all students and facilitate a school environment of safety and support for every student," the statement said.

How racism takes a toll on students' mental health

In recent weeks, the death of a 10-year-old Black and autistic student in Utah prompted more scrutiny for a school district that was already investigated by the Justice Department. It also became a stark reminder of the toll that bullying can take on students' mental health.

The parents of Isabella "Izzy" Tichenor said she was being

bullied by classmates. Some told her she stank and they used the n-word, the family's attorney Tyler Ayres told CNN last month. The parents reported the bullying to multiple school officials at Foxboro Elementary in Farmington, Utah, but they felt like nothing was done, Ayres said.

Izzy's death by suicide on November 6 left her community shocked and led the Davis School District to launch an independent investigation that remains ongoing. The girl's death came weeks after the Justice Department detailed a disturbing pattern where Black and Asian American students at the Davis School District were harassed for years, and officials deliberately ignored complaints from parents and students.



Last week, the district pledged to hire a more diverse staff and appointed a new assistant superintendent who will be working on diversity and equity issues and the district's recent settlement with the DOJ.

A spokesman for the district declined to provide further comment about how school officials are handling the recent controversies linked to racial tensions.

A [study](#) released last month found that young adults who experience discrimination about their bodies, race, age or sex have a greater risk of dealing with mental health problems than those who do not.

Those who faced discrimination frequently -- at least a few times per month -- were around 25% more likely to be diagnosed with a mental disorder and twice as likely to develop severe psychological distress than people who didn't experience discrimination or did less often, according to a study published in the journal *Pediatrics*.

The findings mirror what experts have said about the effects that discrimination and hostile behaviors have on children. Experiencing a negative racial climate at school can impact K-12 students in a number of ways, including lower grades, low engagement and their mental health, said Charity Brown Griffin, a certified school psychologist and an associate professor of psychological sciences at Winston-Salem State University.

"If you have to frequent a place every day where you feel like you don't belong, that you're left out and where you don't don't feel safe, that is certainly going to take a toll on your mental health," Griffin told CNN.

Society often considers schools as race neutral places, she said, but they can be platforms for racial stress and trauma

due to negative racial climate experiences.

While diversity training and initiatives targeting systemic issues can help students, another way to protect students is to help them "create a buffer" from negative experiences by encouraging positive feelings toward their racial identity and culture, Griffin said her research shows.

"Black students and other students of color are still able to thrive, they're still able to perform well because they have these buffers -- but that doesn't mean that the systemic issues do not exist," she said. "The cultural assets have created opportunity for them to rise above and be resilient in spite of."