

How's Your School Climate?

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By Lawrence Hardy

Suspended? For wearing white T-shirts? Local news crews knew a hot story when they saw one, and by lunchtime they had gathered -- cameramen and TV reporters -- across the street from Soquel High School near Santa Cruz, Calif. Earlier that day, a handful of boys had been suspended for one to three days for wearing the T-shirts to a senior class picture. Principal Ken Lawrence-Emanuel said they belonged to a "white power" group that had been warned repeatedly about such displays. But one of the boys said they just wanted "to identify ourselves and look back and say that was our group of friends" Another asked: "How could I be a white supremacist? I'm Asian."

Naturally, the story hit the blogosphere. One right-wing writer, whose site links to anti-immigrant groups in the United States and Europe, accused Lawrence-Emanuel of acting "as judge, jury, and executioner" for nothing more than suspected "thought crimes."

If you're a school board member, administrator, or anyone else connected with the public schools, you might feel for the principal and the no-win situation he faced. And you must surely know that, just as in the case of the "kissing kindergartner" from years back, there is another side -- a big "other side" -- to this story.

Where does a school go from here? Since May, the path has been clear for Soquel High, which has taken advantage of this divisive incident, looked critically at the climate for *all* students and faculty, and worked to make the school a place where people of all races, ethnic groups, wealth brackets, sexual orientation, etc., feel safe and valued.

At a time when the nation finds itself split over politics, economics, immigration policy, and other divisive issues, schools everywhere need to be able to tune out the noise and focus on the essential work of educating an increasingly diverse generation of students.

"There's nothing unusual about what's happened here," says Gary Bloom, superintendent of the Santa Cruz City Schools, a large district that includes everyone from Silicon Valley commuters to immigrant farm workers. "We're at a historic time, when racism can be just below the surface, when right-wing rhetoric can be legitimized on radio and on Fox News, and it's not surprising that some kids latch on to it.

"Teenagers," he adds, "are always looking for a way to resent other teenagers."

Looking for 'critical variables'

This fall, Soquel is working with Teaching Tolerance, a program of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) in Montgomery, Ala., that helps districts improve the climate for all students. Teaching Tolerance and the SPLC have created a website, "The Teaching Diverse Students Initiative," that works with teachers and other school leaders to improve instructional practices.

Among the tools created by Teaching Tolerance is its popular "Mix It Up at Lunch" program, which encourages students at nearly 4,000 schools across the country to acknowledge, and maybe make friends with, students who are different.

"In the vast majority of schools, everybody -- kids and grownups alike -- report that there's a tremendous disrespect for diversity," says Jonathan Cohen, founder and president of the National School Climate Center (NSCC).

Even though teens are naturally wired to seek group acceptance as a way of defining themselves, Cohen says it doesn't have to be this way. Just because a school is ethnically diverse does not mean it can't be an inviting place for all students.

"I would say that's not the critical variable," Cohen says.

What are the critical variables? NSCC's *School Climate Guide for District Policymakers and Educational Leaders* talks about a school community that is intentionally designed to support the social, emotional, ethical, civic, and intellectual development of all students. The guide, which uses NSBA's *Key Work of School Boards* as a model, has eight interrelated action areas that help focus and direct school boards on school climate issues.

For specifically creating a better school climate, NSBA and the Iowa Association of School Board's Iowa Lighthouse Project have developed seven conditions, among them shared leadership, a supportive working environment for staff, and community involvement.

Cohen says NSBA and its Council of Urban Boards of Education, through periodic urban school climate reports, have led the way in highlighting these issues for board members and policymakers.

A new report by NSBA, the College Board, and Education Counsel -- *Achieving Educational Excellence for All: A Guide to Access and Diversity-Related Policy Strategies for School Districts* -- explores everything from the educational benefits of diversity, to diversity in student and faculty assignments policy, to improving community engagement. Saying that education in the nation "is at an important crossroads," the report provides practical guidance for school boards, district leaders, and district staff.

With the support of the Pearson Foundation, NSBA also recently launched an initiative called "Students on Board," which encourages board members to talk directly with students to get their views on school climate. Among the questions board members might ask, according to *Students on Board: A Conversation Between School Board Members and Students*, are:

- "What is school like for you?"
- "Have you seen someone bullied? Did another student or teacher try to stop it? Tell us about it. Is this common or rare?"
- Do you feel respected by teachers and staff? Do students respect each other at this school? What are some examples?"

Aligning the issues

Changing school culture is not easy. But, more and more, education leaders recognize learning cannot happen unless the school climate is marked by trust and respect for differences. It's something educational theorist Roland Barth -- a former teacher, principal, and Harvard professor -- has said for a long time.

"All school cultures are incredibly resistant to change, which makes school improvement -- from within or from without -- usually so futile," Barth wrote in a 2002 essay in *Educational Leadership*. "Unless teachers and administrators act to change the culture of a school, all innovations, all the new higher standards, and the high-stakes tests will have to fit in and around existing elements of the culture. That is, they will be destined to remain superficial window dressing, incapable of making much of a difference."

In July, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder acknowledged as much when they unveiled the "Supportive School Discipline Initiative," which seeks to break the so-called school-to-prison pipeline by emphasizing alternatives to out-of-school suspensions. Duncan and Holder pointed to a disturbing report showing that nearly 60 percent of Texas public secondary school students followed over a six-year period were either suspended or expelled. The more the students were suspended, the greater the chance that they would end up in the criminal justice system, according to the Council of State Governments Justice Center and Texas A&M University.

Moreover, the Texas report showed that African-American students were treated differently than the rest of the population. Examining 83 variables to help pinpoint the effect of race on discipline, the study found that black students had a 31 percent higher chance than whites and Hispanics in similar circumstances of being disciplined for a "discretionary offense" -- that is, an event for which the school is not required by law to suspend or expel a student.

Statistics such as these point to some uncomfortable truths. As Elona Street-Stewart, chair of Minnesota's St. Paul Board of Education, puts it: "There isn't one aspect of our social structure that has not been impacted by racism."

With 75 percent of its students belonging to members of various minority groups, St. Paul cannot afford to ignore issues like racism, bullying, and school climate. Several years ago, the board made a commitment to include anti-racism initiatives as part of its professional development. And that began with board members talking honestly among themselves.

The district, which is working with the consulting firm Pacific Educational Group to help identify educational disparities among various racial and ethnic groups, has sizable numbers of African Americans, Hispanics, and immigrants from Burma, Somalia, and Ethiopia. It publishes all notices in at least three languages.

The dismal economy has hit St. Paul hard, with many families seriously affected. In these times, especially, board members cannot look at education in isolation, but must collaborate with other community groups and be concerned with issues like housing, nutrition, health care, and jobs, Street-Stewart says.

"We can't see these as separate issues," she added. "They all have to be aligned."

Rebuilding the climate

Soquel High School's student population also is ethnically mixed, but it is divided mostly among Latinos, who comprise about 35 percent of the students, and Anglos. There is also considerable economic stratification, from tech workers who commute to Silicon Valley to professors who work at the University of California at Santa Cruz, to farm workers who live in the southern part of the district.

For the farm workers, in particular, finding housing is a struggle. According to Lawrence-Emanuel, the high school principal, Soquel is in one of the least-affordable housing markets in the nation, when considering housing prices and income.

"The economy here is really hurting," Lawrence-Emanuel says. "And this has exacerbated the pain felt by students and families."

Whether those stresses had anything to do with the swastikas and "White Power" graffiti that began appearing around the 1,000-student high school several months ago is hard to say. Some students who wore white to the class picture also dubbed their group "World Peace" in a school competition, but Lawrence-Emanuel says that was "an alias for 'White Power.'"

About five of the 20 students involved in the white T-shirt demonstration were suspended. Lawrence-Emanuel says other students "were fed up. They were hurt and ticked that [the demonstrators] had gone this far."

Still, the principal adds, when the story “went viral, a lot of kids were branded as ‘White Power’ kids when really they’re a bunch of goofy high school students.”

Bloom, the superintendent, was less inclined to excuse any of the participants. He says a “White Pride” gang was forming in the area, and members were looking for students to recruit. At a middle school, the words “Kill the Jews” were scrawled on a wall. And at an elementary school, a fifth-grade girl said after a class on the Holocaust that “the Jews had it coming.”

The vast majority of students “were appalled” at the high school boys’ behavior for the senior class picture, Bloom says. But the school, with the help of Teaching Tolerance, is planning to make the whole incident a learning experience.

This fall, the district is taking several steps to address its problems. Bloom says Santa Cruz will develop student leaders on all campuses, work with all faculty on recognizing and standing up to hate speech, and examine students’ behavior records to get a better understanding of racially tinged issues.

“It’s not just a bunch of teenage boys fooling around,” Bloom said. “I think that’s one of the biggest mistakes we could make. ... There’s got to be a level of understanding that this is not a joke, and there has to be a level of understanding so that students feel they can bring these kinds of things forward.”

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Mixing things up builds bridges between groups of students

The idea came from the Spanish Honor Society: Why not start a “Mix It Up at Lunch” program at Plainview-Bethpage John F. Kennedy High School, a New York public high school with ambition as long as its 11-syllable name?

“We decided to do this even though we didn’t know if it would take off,” says Christina Visbal, a Spanish teacher at the 1,700-student public school on Long Island and head of the honor society, “because the principle is so powerful.”

The principle of the Teaching Tolerance program is, well, exactly what it says it is: good to mix up diverse groups of students, teachers, and staff who generally have little to say to each other. And it happens at lunch.

Plainview-Bethpage John -- oh, let’s just call it “the school” -- is about an hour from New York City, if the traffic is good. It has a mix of white, Asian, African-American, and Hispanic students. It’s in a mostly middle-class area, but there are “families that are struggling,” Visbal says. “People don’t want to see that, but it’s here.”

The program's first year was a little rocky, Visbal says, but then it really took off. In fact, on Mix It Up days, the cafeteria is the place to be, with 200 to 300 or more students either watching or participating. (Most participate, Visbal says.) One event had 12 stations, with everything from Peace Pong (bouncing a pingpong ball into a series of cups), to tic-tac-toe, to Make Your Own Quesada, to Hoop It Up for Acceptance. The idea is to find a partner to play with who is different from you in some way.

"Grab anybody -- a cafeteria lady! Grab a kid and try to be mindful of people who are different than you," says Visbal, who is nothing if not enthusiastic about the program. "We try to be as diverse as possible but without any labels, to recognize differences but be inclusive as a team."

Once they made "Mix it Up Masterpieces." Each student brought a piece of fruit or a vegetable and worked in teams to make some bizarre-looking veggie portraits that were popular, for some reason, in 16th century Europe.

"You know, I walked in the cafeteria, and some kid I've never seen before asked me if I wanted to play pingpong with him," one boy told Visbal after one of the events. "He's my buddy now. I high-five him in the hallways."