

Center for the
Prevention of
Hate Violence



68 High Street, 1st Floor
Portland, Maine 04101
www.preventinghate.org
tel 207.780.4756
tty 207.780.5646
fax 207.228.8550

PORTLAND HIGH SCHOOL:
REPORT SUMMARIZING STUDENT FOCUS GROUPS
ON BIAS AND HARASSMENT

CENTER FOR THE PREVENTION OF HATE VIOLENCE

SEPTEMBER 2006

**PORTLAND HIGH SCHOOL:
Report Summarizing Student Focus Groups
on Bias and Harassment**

Focus Groups Conducted and Report Written By:

Dr. Lelia De Andrade

Associate Director

Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary.....	3
I. Introduction.....	4
A. Research Methodology and Design.....	4
II. Report on Research Findings.....	8
A. National Perspective On Harassment in Schools.....	8
B. Profile Of Portland High Schools.....	9
C. Student Responses.....	9
D. Categories of Harassment and Bias.....	11
1) Sexual Orientation.....	11
2) Race, Ethnicity, and Immigration Status.....	13
a. Immigrant Students.....	14
b. Asian Students.....	18
c. African American Students.....	18
d. Racial, Ethnic Intergroup Relations.....	21
3) Gender.....	24
4) Jewish Students.....	26
5) Other Targeted Groups.....	27
6) Student Comments About the Impact of Harassment.....	29
E. Student Views on Faculty Responses to Harassment.....	30
III. Analysis.....	35
IV. Conclusion.....	36
V. Mission Statement.....	37
VI. Key Personnel.....	38

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CPHV has worked with schools throughout the United States as well as in Northern Ireland and the Middle East. We have yet to work in a school which does not experience disturbing incidents of bias and harassment. Portland High School is no exception. The 110 students who participated in the 15 focus groups described serious issues of harassment involving race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and religion. These same categories also exist in most schools we have worked in. The levels of harassment which students described at Portland High School fall within the range of levels at other schools across the nation.

Portland High School students, however, do stand out from students at other schools.

- PHS students have an extraordinarily acute level of understanding of the emotional impact of bias and harassment on students.
- PHS students have a very sophisticated vocabulary and exceptional understanding of the dynamics of bias and harassment.

Portland High School is Maine's most racially, ethnically and religiously diverse school.

Portland High School students have the ability to create a climate of inclusion and respect which can be a model for the state, and the nation.

I: INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2006, the Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence (CPHV) began conducting research to evaluate the social climate at Portland High School. More specifically, CPHV designed and implemented a research project to evaluate the frequency, form and impact of bias and harassment at the high school. At CPHV, we believed that this was an opportune time to assess the school's climate, given the relatively constant and dramatic changes in recent years in the demographic composition of the city of Portland, and at Portland's largest and oldest high school. We were also interested in conducting this research because Portland High School had implemented programs and policies to address bias and harassment several years ago, and we hoped to assist the school in evaluating its climate in light of these programs.

A. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

For this project, CPHV selected the focus group research method to collect data. With this method, a researcher meets with small groups of participants to facilitate discussions focused on select topics. As part of facilitating these conversations, the researcher may ask several direct questions and solicit both verbal and written responses from participants. The focus group method of data collection is an approach that is commonly used in social science and market research. This method is quite different from survey research which gathers answers to predetermined questions from very large groups of randomly selected participants. With focus groups, the researcher uses open ended questions *and* discussion to collect large amounts of very detailed information from participants. This includes not only responses to predetermined questions, but discussions of related and relevant information that the participants mention but which the researchers may not have known or identified before conducting the research. The data collected during these meetings then are analyzed for content, identifying significant themes and patterns. This research strategy provides a very rich, detailed and compelling view of aspects of a cultural climate as perceived by members of a community.

CPHV selected the focus group research method because we have found that it works particularly well for assessing the content and impact of harassment at schools. There are two important reasons for this. First, we have found that students tend to be relatively comfortable meeting in groups with other students. As a result they tend to have very attentive and active participation and share many detailed responses in the group discussions. This high level of comfort and participation can be particularly difficult to attain with other forms of research commonly used in American schools, such as surveys, because students are so frequently subjected to them. Second, because the focus group method can allow for unanticipated topics to emerge, it works particularly well for evaluating school cultures which are unique and constantly changing, with terms and groups varying across school cultures and sometimes emerging and disappearing in the course of one school year.

FOCUS GROUP STRUCTURE

CPHV began this research project by meeting with the Portland High School administrators, counselors, social workers and others to identify those socio-cultural groups which should be included in the focus groups. Together we identified fifteen distinct socio-cultural groups, representing various racial, ethnic, gender, and cultural populations.

One important element of our research strategy is that we organize student participants into groups that share similar characteristics, such as gender, and racial-ethnic identity. We do this because we have found that this arrangement often increases the comfort level of some students, especially those who are members of groups which are common targets of harassment (such as racial minorities and girls). We expect that the increase in student comfort level that results from this grouping strategy will by extension result in students responding more candidly and providing more information for our research.

The groups which participated in the focus groups were as follows:

African (non Somali) Females

African (non-Somali) Males

African American Females

African American Males
Students in Alternative Education (both genders)
Caucasian Males
Females (various races)
Hispanic students (both genders)
Jewish students
Students from assorted nations (male and female)
Students in the Asian Student Association
Students in the Gay/Straight Alliance
Somali Females
Somali Males
Special Education students (both genders)

On April 11th, 12th, 13th and 15th, CPHV Associate Director, Dr. Lelia L. De Andrade conducted the focus groups with a total of one hundred ten students in ninth through twelfth grades. Of them, fifty-seven were males and fifty-three were females.

Each focus group met for approximately one hour. Whenever possible, Principal Michael Johnson introduced the focus groups. He explained that the students gathered were selected to participate in discussions about what goes on in school. He assured the students that their responses would be confidential and that he hoped that they would provide as much information as possible. Following his introduction, and in cases when Mr. Johnson was not available to introduce the group, Dr. De Andrade explained that these meetings were intended to collect the perspectives of participants on issues relating to bias, stereotyping and harassment in school. She also explained that the comments of participants would remain anonymous in a summarizing report that will be sent to the school administration.

After this introduction, Dr. De Andrade followed CPHV guidelines, asking several questions related to harassment and bias, including questions about the kinds of students or characteristics which are common targets of harassment and about the language commonly used at Portland High School.

In addition to facilitating these open discussions about harassment during our focus group meetings, we also ask the students who participate in the focus groups to write anonymous responses to the following:

- Describe one or two incidents of bias or harassment that you witnessed or experienced
- Describe the impact of an incident of bias or harassment had on you or someone you know.

We have included a selection of the written responses to these questions as well as the verbal comments made during our focus group meetings in the body of this report.

THE USE OF DEGRADING LANGUAGE IN THIS REPORT

In this report, we use the actual descriptions of incidents that the students who participated in the focus groups provided during our meetings. Many of these descriptions contain highly degrading language, jokes and slurs.

We recognize that many people who read this report will find these descriptions extremely disturbing and upsetting and we apologize to those readers. We have chosen to include these descriptions in this report because we believe that it is very difficult to understand school climate by talking *about* or *around* the issue. That is, merely telling readers that students use degrading language does not inform them about the forms and nature of the language, words and jokes spoken in school. Consequently, we have included descriptions given to us by students, which have not been edited to remove graphic, degrading or other disturbing language.

SECTION II: REPORT ON RESEARCH FINDINGS

A. NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON HARASSMENT IN SCHOOLS

At the Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence we have had the opportunity to work with many schools throughout the region and the country. In this year alone, we have conducted eighty focus groups and three hundred eighty-two anti-harassment programs in schools in eleven states across the country¹. These schools vary greatly in terms of their demographic composition and geographic location. They range from very ethnically diverse urban schools in Southern California to predominantly white schools in the rural south, and include small town, rural suburban and urban schools throughout New England. Our experience in all of these schools reflects the trends identified in national research, that bias, stereotyping and harassment are all too common elements of daily school culture. We have found that the same issues exist at every high school, students get harassed on the basis of their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and religion as well as other characteristics.

That Portland High School experiences these issues is not, therefore, surprising. At CPHV, we have found that high schools are distinguished less by the severity of the bias, stereotyping and harassment they have than they are by the willingness of school leaders to address these issues with honesty, creativity and boldness.

By this latter measurement Portland High School is a very positive example of leadership in confronting, responding to and preventing prejudice and harassment.

¹ We have also conducted several programs overseas, including focus group research similar to this one at a school in Northern Ireland.

B. PROFILE OF PORTLAND HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

In the course of this research project, we found that there are two characteristics of Portland High School students' understanding and approach to issues of harassment that are distinct from what we commonly find among other students their age. First, students at Portland High School expressed a remarkably high level of empathy and concern about the impact of harassment on other students. In nearly every focus group, the students readily and immediately shifted the focus of discussions to how their peers must feel in the face of degrading language and harassment. Second, the students who participated in our focus groups reported a high rate of student interventions in situations of harassment. According to these students, they recognized that they have an important role in interrupting harassment at school, and described many positive strategies that they have or would like to use to improve the climate at Portland High School.

For these important reasons, we view the students at Portland High School as having a very advanced understanding of the dynamics of harassment and its prevention. We recognize that Portland High School has been dedicated to addressing harassment and bias, through numerous programs and for many years, and these efforts have clearly been effective in producing very committed, sophisticated and sensitive students. Portland High School should be applauded for this truly remarkable achievement.

C. STUDENT RESPONSES

While we found that Portland High School students were very impressive and unique in terms of their understanding of harassment, there were two ways in which their responses followed trends that we at CPHV have observed nationally.

First, like many students who participate in our programs and focus groups, Portland High School students were confident that there is relatively little harassment at their school as compared to other schools. We often encounter students who initially respond to anti-harassment research and programming in this way. This is particularly the case among students who have a high degree of loyalty and respect for their school, which students at Portland High School certainly expressed. We recognize that this may in fact be an accurate assessment of the amount or *quantity* of harassment at Portland High School relative to other schools. We did not collect data that could support or validate their assertions, but given the sophistication and sensitivity that the Portland High School students demonstrated about harassment, we think that these assertions, while common, are worth noting and considering.

Second, and perhaps most important, the descriptions of harassment and degrading language that students provided were quite similar in terms of *content* and *context* to those we have collected in research or programming that we conducted. In other words, when students described the harassment and degrading language that they have witnessed or heard, they included many of the same targeted groups, topics of harassment, and degrading language that are commonly found in other schools. They also reported that much of the harassment is indirect, and shows up in the form of jokes or private comments among friends. Consider, for example the following comments students made about the overall climate of harassment at Portland High School:

- Physically, I think people feel safe but there's definitely a lot of language use that is offensive.
- There's a lot of harassment. It's mostly joking around in small groups. It doesn't happen often and when it does, everyone hears about it and it has to stop.
- Most of the stuff that goes on is in the group. It's not directed at people. It's behind people's backs.
- There is harassment here. Whether you notice it depends on where you hang out. Where you see it is in the hallway near the office, in the gym, in the lower atrium.

D. CATEGORIES OF HARASSMENT AND BIAS

In both their verbal and in their anonymous written statements, students identified sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, immigration status, and gender as common subjects of degrading language, harassment and social tensions. They also identified religion as another, frequent but less common subject of these problem behaviors and tensions.

1. SEXUAL ORIENTATION

According to students, the use of anti-gay slurs is very common in school. These students explained that anti-gay slurs are often used to express disdain for objects, activities or behaviors, and are usually not used directly toward gay students.

- A lot of my friends use “that’s so gay.” It’s not used as a put-down toward gay people, but as a substitute for the word “stupid.”
- I don’t think that most people use it to mean you’re a horrible gay person. They just mean you’re stupid
- People think that there’s no one that they’re going to offend, so that they can say anything they want about the groups that they think aren’t present. That’s when they use the anti-gay language.

Students also reported that they have periodically seen gay and lesbian students targeted directly, or straight students distance themselves socially from gay and lesbian students because of their dislike or discomfort with gay and lesbian students.

- I’ve seen lesbians made fun of. They’ll say “oh you stupid dyke”.
- People wouldn’t harass you if you’re gay, but some people won’t be your friends.
- It is hard because people here have different religions, and some of them have really strong feelings about gays which makes things awkward sometimes. I only know of one student who will say “It is against my religion. I don’t like it!” There are probably a few others but they don’t vocalize it.

- Most of the population here is okay with it but some are uncomfortable with gay students, mostly guys. They talk about gay students out loud enough so that I'm sure that they hear it.
- I don't think that it is uncomfortable for gay students here, but behind backs you hear people say, "I hate that fag" or "Why do these gay people have to be here". It is never to their faces.

Impact of Anti-Gay Language and Harassment

Many of the students that we met with were very concerned about the impact of anti-gay slurs on gay and lesbian students. When discussing the use of anti-gay slurs, nearly all of the students we met with explained that they understood that the casual use of this language had a negative impact on gay and lesbian students, regardless of whether they were being directly targeted or not.

- I think that we need to have more knowledge at this school about the language issue, about how our language affects people. It really hurts people when we use some language, like when you hear someone using the word "gay" as stupid. I don't think they know just how much it can affect people, how hurtful it is.
- I have gay friends and I think that sometimes they're uncomfortable around other kids because they say "that's gay" a lot.
- I think that there must be something wrong for gay students I think there must be fear. People must be afraid. There aren't that many 'out' students here. I think that says something. There's some sort of disconnection for gay students. There are people here that wouldn't want to be their friends because they're gay.
- I noticed people use slurs about sexual orientation without even realizing it that it scares people who are gay.

- I think it's hard to be gay here. There's only a few gay students here so it must be hard. It's not like people get harassed but it must be hard. They hear "That's gay" all the time. Here it's mostly that people will use gay as a synonym for stupid. I know that it has impact on gay students.
- A friend of mine, who is gay, was afraid to come out last year though he eventually did. Because he was afraid to come out, he started drinking and even cutting himself. Now that he has come out, he has stopped that destructive behavior, but I can see where he is coming from. Who wants to be afraid of being themselves?

Some students expressed frustration with the common use of anti-gay slurs at school. These students reported that they try to interrupt this language, or speak out when they hear it.

- I was in class last year and there was a kid I really disagreed with. We clashed really badly because he was always saying stuff about gays. I tried not to be aggressive and be nice, but it was kind of hard when you're always hearing something so wrong.
- People will use the word "fag" and I'll say "Why do you use that word?" I don't understand.

2. RACE, ETHNICITY, AND IMMIGRATION STATUS

In all of the groups that we met with, students identified race, ethnicity and immigration as common subjects of social tensions and harassment at school. Students reported that immigrant students, Somalis, African Americans, Latinos and Asians are frequent targets of harassment, bias, and stereotyping.

a. IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Most of the students that we met with expressed a high level of concern for the experiences of immigrant students. Both American-born and immigrant students described the climate at Portland High School as challenging for immigrant students, particularly English as a Second Language (ESL) students, because of the level of bias they encounter. They explained that ESL and other immigrant students frequently encounter teasing, derogatory comments, and social distancing.

- I think that tension with immigrant students are probably the worst. It is difficult because of the language barriers. They have a hard time.
- It seems that immigrant kids get picked on. They don't know, because they don't understand. I see it all the time.
- Some kids feel put down because they don't know English. They think that people think that they are dumb.
- Immigrants get targeted the most here. Not the Eastern European kids because they tend to blend in more.
- In the new wing some ESL kid got lost, and the white kids around all laughed.

Somali Students

According to many students, within the population of immigrant students, Somalis are the ethnic group most often targeted with harassment. Many American-born students reported tensions between White students and Somalis, as well as stereotypes and derogatory language targeting Somalis. Some of these students also expressed fear and/or dislike of the group:

- I hear a lot of stuff about Somalis. They say a lot of not nice things like "I hate those stupid Somalis!" Stuff like that... or they'll say how they smell or how it is unhygienic that they wash in the bathroom.
- I hear people say that Somalis should not be able to wash in the bathroom.
- I hear all the time when Somalians walk by things like, "Oh, she stole my sheets/towels." A lot of people find it funny, but it really isn't.

- There is constant trash talking about Somalians. Some people will say things like “Niggers, go back to your own country.”
- I hear people say that Somalians should follow American rules or go back to their country.

Somali students themselves also described the climate at Portland High School as sometimes being very difficult. According to these students, the tensions that they experience are related to misunderstandings about Somali culture and religion.

- I have been called a terrorist so many times. I was spit at because of what I was wearing. Sudanese kids, they can be treated better. They are Christian. They are black too, but at least they have something in common because they are Christian. But us, we are Muslim and we are black, so there’s nothing, there’s nothing in common. It makes it harder.
- I was walking in the hall. I saw a boy and a girl kissing and then I said “Oh my God” because it is something strange for me and then the boy said “Hey, you African girl, go back to your country.”
- We Somalis, we don’t like to fight but sometimes they force you. They’ll say something about your mother, and you have to. This is the way that we are; you don’t say anything about our mothers.
- I was walking down the street and this guy said, “Fuck you Muslim!” I said “Oh Really”. He said, “Yeah!” Some people they can’t hide their hatred. If they could kill you they would, because I am a Muslim and I am black. They think I am a terrorist. Most people *here* are not like that. But there are some.

Other African Students

The other African students that we met with described experiences similar to those reported by Somalis. According to these students, as well as American-born students, African students are targeted with stereotypes, as well as degrading comments about being African and immigrants in particular.

- I've heard people say "Those fucking Africans need to go back to their countries. They're infecting us with AIDS."
- I've heard kids talking trash about Africans being in the lower caf telling them "this isn't the ghetto" or "go back to Africa" or saying they should "get back on the boat".
- Some kids here think that if you come from Africa, you come from the lowest place.
- Sudanese and Somalians are the most targeted. I hear every day someone say that they smell or I've heard white students say that it smells in here, really loudly.
- There's harassment here all the time. Big Time! Black people get it the most. Africans.
- I was walking down the hallway and a White kid told me "Nigger down and White kid up."

Latino Students

While most of the students in all of the focus groups reported that anti-African harassment is more prevalent than other types of harassment targeting immigrant students, many also reported that Latino students are targeted. According to the Latino students that we met with, they most often face the language related challenges described above in the section about the harassment of immigrant students. These students, however also reported being targeted with degrading racial slurs.

- I hear people yelling down the halls "spick control".
- I hear "Stupid Mexican", "retard", "Dumb ass."
- People call me Mexican and to make them a burrito, but I am not even Mexican.
- I hear people called "Beaner."

Impact of Anti-Immigrant Language and Harassment

The impact of these patterns of anti-immigrant bias and harassment on students is significant. Most of the immigrant students of color described feeling angry, isolated at school, looked down upon, and unwelcome. Several students reported that they sometimes felt hesitant to participate in class. Others reported that the harassment, stereotypes and bias make them feel as though they have to work harder. American born students also commented on the impact of harassment on immigrant students, expressing serious concern and empathy.

- It's hard for ESL students. They're isolated or shy or even offended by the way we talk. I feel bad.
- I think it must be really hard for the immigrant students and some students here don't know. I mean they come to a new county and are learning a new language. Some kids think that they're stupid and that they don't know anything. Actually they have to be pretty smart if they're doing all of this in a new language.
- In my case I feel afraid to speak with some people because I think they are going to laugh about how you speak English. Sometimes people who can speak English laugh at people who are learning and I think that is something very bad for people from foreign countries. I think they should think about it.
- I've seen some people, when you're trying to speak English, they'll laugh. It makes you feel uncomfortable. You feel intimidated.
- They don't understand that we may be smart. Just because we don't speak the language doesn't mean that we are stupid. Sometimes they think that we are. Like with math. If you don't know English but you know Math what do you do?
- It is really hurtful when someone says something about you. It's not fair, it is really hurtful. Sometimes I say I wish I had never left and come here to the USA.
- Black kids try their hardest all the time. You know that you have to give all that you've got; you've got to give 150%. People don't know that.

b. ASIAN STUDENTS

Students in the focus groups also described harassment targeting both Asian and Asian American students. These degrading comments include anti-Asian slurs.

- “Hey, Bruce, wanna make me some pork fried rice?” (Bruce referring to Bruce Lee.)
- Asian people are small, that is what they say to Asian students.
- After a young Asian boy walked in the hallway, a White male walked behind them and danced “a ritual” while saying “gook” and “chink”.

Some Asian American students also explained that they have been the subject of degrading stereotypes, which include assumptions about their involvement in gangs and the areas where they live.

c. AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

According to students in our focus groups, derogatory language, harassment and degrading stereotypes are also directed at African American students at Portland High School.

The “N” Word

Many of the students focused specifically on the use of word “nigger” at school, and discussed several different interpretations of the use of the word. Students that we met with, both African American and others, reported that the word is sometimes used in a clearly threatening and degrading manner. Some African American students described being upset and shocked by the use of the word in any manner.

- Some white girl here wrote on MySpace “I hate Niggers”
- In the bathroom someone wrote “I hate niggers”. Someone wrote “Go back to your country”. They say that all the time. They even write “White power.”
- In the bathroom people write stuff. Like at the library someone wrote “nigger” on the table.

- I heard someone say “I got a special tree in my yard for you, nigga.”
- Someone said, “I’m gonna lynch these niggers when I get a chance.”
- I’ve heard people comment on how they should segregate schools again because of stinky “niggers”.
- It really bothers me to hear the N word. There’s a group of white guys who watch TV and listen to music and they generalize that all black people are like that and they think its okay to use that word.
- I hear people around school all day saying “nigger” for no reason. They use it as a slang!
- We hear white students using the “N” word. You want to say something but you hesitate. I think the reason for it is that Black guys give their friends permission. It’s offensive and never okay with me.

In addition to these reports, some students offered alternative interpretations of the use of the “N” word at Portland High School. Some of these students reported that it is only used in a friendly manner by Black students and never by White students, while others reported that it is used frequently and in the same manner by White students. Several students that we met with expressed frustration and confusion about which groups can appropriately use the term and which can’t.

- We hear the “N” word, but it’s only when people are trying to be friendly. Black kids use it a lot. It’s not a big deal.
- Everybody here says “Nigger”. Mostly it is between black people, but I think that a lot of other people use the word too. They use it as “my brother.”
- Sometimes you hear people use the “N” word on teams, but in a friendly way. Some white kids say it because they’re trying to say anything that they think is cool.
- Black kids here use the N word with each other all the time, but if someone white uses the word it’s a big deal. If you’re Spanish its not as big a deal as if you were white.
- The white students say, “If you can say it, why can’t we?” Then the Spanish and the Asians, and everyone else uses it. Mostly guys.

- I hear black kids use the N word a lot but if a white kids uses it it's bad.

Stereotyping

The African American students that met in focus groups also reported that racially degrading stereotypes of Black people are common at school. They described being seen as “poor,” “dumb,” and “dirty”, because they are Black, regardless of their behavior or their academic success. According to these students, when they challenge these stereotypes, they face insulting comments about their racial identity, and other forms of harassment.

- People will stereotype us as poor, dumb, athletes, gangsta's. They don't even know what a real gangsta is.
- I hear that white people say about black people “They smell bad”, “Look how lazy they are” and “Look how they act.”
- Some white people here don't know how to handle Black people. They think we're all going to fight.
- If one black person fights, people think that it's all Black people. They visualize a big group and many people. It just gets distorted.
- If you're black and really preppy they'll make fun of you.
- Don't get me wrong. I love to see a black guy in tims or something but I also want to see them in a nice button down. If a black guy does that, people will say he's preppy or gay. They force you into a role and if you're different they're going to talk about you.

Impact of Racist Language, Stereotyping and Harassment

The African American students that we met with reported that these experiences with harassment, derogatory language and stereotyping also can have a negative impact on their academic performance and self-esteem.

- They'll come up and say you're from NY or NJ, or TN or FL. They don't think that we're from here. It bugs me when they assume that. They think that there are no Black people who are actually from Maine. And I'll say, no, I'm from here.
- I was afraid to take college classes because they might be all white. But I decided that I'm going to take my chance.
- Some students of color are scared or feel that they look stupid and they're uncomfortable taking college classes with all white kids so they don't take those classes.
- We know that we have to work much harder because we've been downgraded. But some kids accept the stereotype and give up. By the end of the year, they're out of your class. It's sad.
- I heard some white guy say "this is my main Nigger right here" and we were in shock, we couldn't move.

d. RACIAL, ETHNIC INTERGROUP RELATIONS

In all of our focus groups, students repeatedly mentioned two related issues when discussing the climate at Portland High School: the amount of diversity and integration in the school and the social arrangements in the school's two cafeterias.

On Diversity and Integration

All of the students that we met with described the tremendous amount of diversity at Portland High School as a strength. Some students explained that the degree of diversity acts as a control against discrimination and the targeting of particular groups. However, some students in the focus groups did express frustration or disappointment in the limited amount in interaction that occurs across group boundaries. Many students suggested that what harassment and stereotyping there is at Portland High School is the result of the limited opportunities students have to interact with members of other groups. This is particularly a concern in classrooms and advisory groups.

- We don't get to have classes with other groups. We need more integration with different groups. For some of us, we just have the same white middle class kids in our class that have been in our class since elementary school and even preschool.
- We need more interaction between people. If we got to know each other we wouldn't be saying this stuff about them. It makes it easier for you to say something if you know them and you could say that it's not true. You wouldn't want to be offensive, because you'd know what they've been through.
- We need more opportunities for people from different classes to be in class together, like general, honors, college- because the ESL kids are in some of those classes and people need opportunities to get to know other students who are different than them. Even electives are not very mixed.
- Our executive board is mostly Caucasian. Maybe we need more minority involvement. We need more diversity in the school leadership. We need to work on that.

On the Cafeterias

Students also expressed concern about the lack of integration in the school's cafeterias. In every focus group, when students discussed racial and ethnic relations at Portland High School, they focused on the social divisions in the cafeterias. Students described the cafeterias as each being dominated by a particular racial group, with the lower cafeteria dominated by white students and the upper cafeteria dominated by immigrant students and students of color. Students varied in terms of their feelings and interpretation of this arrangement. To some students the division in the cafeteria is actually based on class differences that coincidentally correspond with racial groupings. In other words, to these students the upper cafeteria is dominated by lower income students who also happen to be students of color, while the lower cafeteria is dominated by wealthier students who just happen to be white. Other students understood the divide to be based on race and class combined. Many students, regardless of their interpretation of the causes or their racial-ethnic identity, described the lower cafeteria as exclusive and unwelcoming. According to these students, this arrangement creates tension and is disliked.

- They funnel kids into the upper caf who are poor.

- All the rich people sit in the lower caf and the people who have free lunch sit in the upper caf, then you see all the Goth kids downstairs.
- I try to go to the lower caf and they stare at me. I don't feel comfortable. You stay where you went during your first year.
- Some people feel like everyone is staring at them when they go into the lower caf, that's why they don't go.
- I hate the way the caf is. I go out because I just can't stand it.
- I don't go in to the lower café because they're all preppy and snobby. I'm white but the lower caf kids are rich and exclusive like it's their club. I sit in the upper caf because I feel comfortable there.
- People in the lower caf will stare at anybody who walks down there. Even white kids.
- In middle school it was different. Everyone sat with everyone. Here, the caf is segregated by white and color and with groups by their country.
- The cafs are segregated and they shouldn't be.

It should be noted that other students explained that the divisions in the cafeterias are really based on social groupings that are independent of race and class. To these students, the seating patterns in the cafeterias are determined by friendship groups, and both cafeterias are equally welcoming.

- In lower caf its mostly rich kids. It has nothing to do with race. It's about where they feel comfortable.
- Most kids sit with their friends, and their friends tend to be part of their same race or speak the same language.
- There are definitely more white kids in the lower caf, but there is some integration. You see white kids in the upper caf all the time. I'm one of those white kids. I sit up there, and I don't have any problems with it at all.

- People sit with who ever speaks the same language, not just some random people. The caf is divided like that because people are sitting with their friends, people that they hang out with.

3. GENDER

Students in all of the focus groups reported hearing the words “bitch,” “skank,” “cunt”, and “ho,” frequently at school. Students reported that they hear these slurs used by both girls and boys.

- I hear slut a lot. I hear it all the time, “damn ho’s”, “ho”, “skank”, “prude”, “cocktease”.
- I hear bitch a lot. Mostly I hear it from girls.
- Girls use words like bitch with each other when they know each other.
- I heard a lot of people saying to freshmen girls, “You’re a slut, whore, chickenhead, skank” because they mess with upper classmen.
- Both guys and girls will call girls bitches and “ho’s”.
- My little sister goes here, and she and all her friends will call each other whore, likes its funny. They use it all the time, or they’ll say she’s a bitch.
- Sometimes you hear the word bitch used between couples. The guy will say “She’s a bitch” about the girl he’s involved with.
- I hear girls say Bitch to girls and boys to boys, but mostly its just joking with friends.
- People will use putdowns, slurs as a joke between friends, like “slut” and “ho”.

Although many students in our focus groups explained that Portland High School girls would not tolerate any sexually degrading behavior, several students did report, in both their verbal and anonymous written statements that they have seen or heard about sexually degrading behavior targeting girls at school. These behaviors, which include unwanted touching, appear to be primarily limited to students in the ninth and tenth grades.

- I've seen boys touch girls when there's a crowd in the hallway. They'll just reach out smack some random girl's ass and she won't know where it came from because it's crowded. I don't see it much but I do see it happening sometimes.
- Some guy touched my butt, two times on purpose and his friends all laughed. Later that day the same guy reaches out and touched my friend's breast.
- I've heard boy talking about sharing pictures of their girlfriends' body parts, like their chest.
- I've heard guys say to girls that they "aren't worth anything, just a good fuck."

Impact of Gendered Language and Harassment

Students in our focus groups described their frustration with the common use of gendered slurs at school. These students emphasized the negative impact of this language on girls and the climate at Portland High School in general. Other students explained that they were shocked that these slurs are used at the school.

- I hear the word "Bitch" walking down the hall. It is just ridiculous. You'll hear these girls saying it and you just want to say "What is your problem? You're ridiculous talking like that!"
- It's common for guys to use "that bitch" referring to girls. I hear it all the time. When you're walking down the hall you hear someone say "bitch" and you turn around because you can feel it, the impact of it.
- We've had some pretty serious girl fights, and then they start yelling those words and it's ridiculous. It doesn't happen very often though.
- I hate it the way girls do that, 'where my "ho's" at'. Its ridiculous but you hear it all the time.
- I knew a girl who was harassed every day for being a "slut", "whore" and for being sexually involved with an athlete. Since then she has withdrew herself from friends and is involved in heavy drugs.

- Sometime after school as I walk past I heard people calling their friend a “b” word, but people sometimes think it is not a joke and they can get very angry at their friend.

4. JEWISH STUDENTS

The Jewish students that we met with offered descriptions of anti-Semitic language and behavior that follow two general patterns. First, they explained that students use the term ‘Jew’ like anti-gay slurs to express disdain or to put down other students. These students reported that much of this language usage occurs “between friends” and is said in an “only joking” manner.

- I hear people say things like you’re so Jewish or you’re a kike.
- People will just use Jew to say that’s someone is greedy. They use it to mean that something is stupid
- I have heard people refer to things that are bad as “Jewish”.
- Someone said “Don’t be a fucking Jew.”
- They’ll say “That’s so Jewish”. When I hear it, it’s with friends and one is Jewish.

Second, students described the use of degrading Jewish stereotypes and jokes with violent imagery often referencing the holocaust.

- I heard a boy tell a girl that Jews are such horny people that they’re freaks.
- If I’m with my friends and they ask to borrow money, I can’t say no without someone saying that Jewish thing.
- I heard some people talk about ovens that burn Jews alive.
- I once saw a 4 foot Swastika on the bathroom wall.
- I’m Jewish and one time at a bonfire someone told me to watch out for the flames or I’d go the same way as my ancestors.
- I remember when I was a freshmen there was a long bus trip for baseball. We were all making jokes and this kid made up one about me that said My name is ... I am a Jew. In the oven you’ll see my crew.

Impact of Anti-Semitic Language and Harassment

While in discussion, the students downplayed the frequency and impact of this, in their written statements some students described the negative feelings that result from hearing anti-Semitic language. These feelings ranged from being annoyed and angry to feeling self-conscious and wanting to deny their identity.

- When I hear comments made about my religion, I don't feel threatened or beaten down. If people make anti-Jewish comments I get really angry and scared, not for myself but for those insulting me. How can people be so insensitive and ignorant?
- Whenever I play poker with friends and win money, I'm always being told by them that I don't need it because I'm Jewish and I hide my money. I think most of it is just trying to crack a joke and that's it. At the same time, I get self-conscious because I wonder if some really feel that way.
- I am terrified to admit that I'm Jewish. I've stopped going to Temple and celebrating Jewish holidays. When people in my classes ask me if I'm Jewish, I go to any length to deny it. Every day is a constant struggle to hide my religion from the world. I no longer wear the beautiful jewelry my parents and grandmother gave me for my Bat Mitzvah. I've detached myself from all the Jewish friends I used to have. I purposely go to school on the High Holy Days when we're supposed to stay home or go pray. I've lost my religion and my identity. All because one person said I deserved to burn like the rest of my kind. I'm burning on the inside. I hope they're happy.

5. OTHER TARGETED GROUPS

While students identified the issues described above as central to their concerns about harassment, several also explained that students with other characteristics are occasionally targeted.

WEIGHT

- The boys in my bio class make fun of one girl because she is “too skinny” almost every class.
- When people are overweight they get made fun of. I have heard it towards me and other girls. They say like “fucking pig”, “fat ass” and other stuff like that.
- At certain times people get abused due to their weight. I walked by some kids saying this girl will never “get” with anyone because she is fat. I got very mad and I thought how bad that girl must have felt when she was “insulted” that way.
- My friends will always make fun of my ‘hefty sized’ friend whenever he has a different colored tee on line if he is wearing orange they will call him an orange or a peach.
- My friend gets made fun of for his size and it makes him feel like shit even though he doesn’t show it.

DISABILITY

- People say retarded all the time. They don’t even think about it.
- In classes I’m targeted because I’m a bad speaker. You just know that they’ll watch and wait for anything different so that they can make fun of you for it.
- Kids get called sped. There’s a severely disabled kid that gets called it all the time. Not the kids who have small problems
- I was trying to finish up a test and some guy came up to me and said what’s taking you so long are you retarded. I need extra time to take tests.
- I hear “are you retarded?” and “that’s so retarded” a lot.

DRESS

- People call kids strange or weird just because they hang out with “Goths.”

- 2 girls get name called or pushed around because of the way they dress or were brought up. It seems hurtful and they keep it to themselves. I wonder what runs through their minds when they go home since I feel guilty seeing it.

6. STUDENT COMMENTS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF HARASSMENT

As part of the focus group meetings, we asked all of the students who participated to reflect on the impact of harassment and degrading language on students. We asked the students to focus specifically on an incident of harassment or a student who had been targeted with harassment and to write descriptions of the feelings and behaviors that have resulted. The following written statements are a selection of students' descriptions of the general impact of harassment on students at school.

- They feel like they want to come to school and shoot someone in the fricken skull.
- The people that get called names don't really come to school because they don't want to listen to it!
- I've been targeted myself. I've been called ugly and stupid and it basically drove me out of school in my freshman year. I didn't ever come to school and I felt like I needed to be "cool" so I did drugs and drank to be "cool". I felt like shit and fucked up. I'm doing better in school but my self esteem is still low as hell.
- Things I've seen when kids got picked on are: There might be a fight, the person maybe doesn't want to come to school, the person might cry, the most dangerous thing is the person might kill himself/herself.
- I feel real bad for the people who get picked on and sometimes I go over to them and you know, just make small talk but other people may make bad comments about me. I think people judge too quick.
- I used to be a target but I think it made me stronger and it taught me how to speak up for myself. Seeing friends get picked on, I often stick up for them because I used to hope someone did that for me.

- When you get targeted it makes you feel like you did something wrong and you probably didn't. When you get called names it makes you have low self-esteem and after a while no confidence.
- People don't show it but it hurts like hell. I have gone through it and it makes you feel like you want to die to become someone else.
- I feel bad that our school can be so segregated and that a lot of the bad things that go on aren't seen by the students it's not happening to.
- I think the impact is extremely influential. I've seen some kids leave school and don't come back for weeks. I think kids don't think before they speak at all.

E. STUDENT VIEWS ON FACULTY RESPONSES TO HARASSMENT

During the focus groups, we asked all of the students to discuss the response of teachers to student targeted harassment. Students explained that many teachers reliably intervene when they encounter harassment or disrespectful behavior. They also reported that there are teachers and staff members who are well known for their advocacy and support of students in regard to bias and harassment. White students as well as immigrant students and students of color, also expressed confidence in other administrators and specific teachers within special programs.

- Teachers if they catch it, they'll do something about it. The assistant principal and the principal, they'll do something about it right away. They don't put up with that shit.
- There are some teachers here who are really hard on respect. They won't let anyone say anything disrespectful in class.
- Especially the teachers in ACOP and AEP. They'll stand up for you.
- The teachers who run the international show are really good at accepting and promoting other cultures.
- Mr. _____ will hear you and investigate and give you a chance.
- I think that they're doing the best that they can. Most of the teachers are.

- Teachers like Mrs. _____, even though she's from a different place, she knows about us. She always helps.

According to students, there are other teachers who may be aware of harassment, but unwilling or unable to address it. Students also described some teachers as tolerant of harassment, and others as participating in the harassment themselves.

- Teachers who are older and teachers who are senior, they'll speak up. Younger teachers tend to let it go more often. Older teachers know that if they don't speak up it will just get worse.
- Teachers don't deliberately ignore these situations. They just don't know how to respond. I think that they need a required training or something.
- I have a teacher who says politically incorrect things in class about just about everything. He especially makes really sexist jokes.
- Some teachers they just let it go on. They don't do anything to help.
- There are some teachers that give a certain group of kids too much leeway and others who are really hard on them. They're supposed to be here to teach, they're not supposed to be judging us, and some of them do. It shouldn't matter what our color is or our religions.
- Teachers need to be more educated about other cultures and more sensitive. They're supposed to be role models and help but they just ignore it.

EXPERIENCES OF RACIAL MINORITY, AND IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Immigrant students and students of color who participated in the focus groups expressed very strong feelings about the role of faculty and staff in harassment and harassment prevention at school. In all of the group meetings with these students, many of them reported feeling that some teachers in the school were racist or biased themselves. There were two general patterns to students' complaints in this regard: 1) students described situations in the classroom in which teachers behaved in a way that suggested that they were biased, which impacted students learning; 2) students described teachers and staff as unfairly targeting students of color with disciplinary action because of this bias, especially in the halls.

IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

Many immigrant students (who were all students of color) expressed mixed feelings about the treatment they receive from some teachers and staff. Some teachers, they said are particularly helpful and sensitive about their cultural and language differences. These students reported that regardless of their treatment by other students, they can often take comfort in the fact that some teachers and administrators will always take a strong stand against bias and harassment. These same students, however, also reported that they were frustrated that some teachers seem to target ESL and immigrant students specifically. They explained that behavior is particularly upsetting when it appears to be based on stereotypes about their purportedly bad or suspicious behavior and lack of ability.

- When I was a freshman, I heard this woman who works here; I don't want to say her name. She said "I hate these ESL students. When they pass the test and move from ESL they mess every thing up. They change everything."
- I've noticed that Somalis tend to be louder and rowdier and that some teachers automatically assume, if they have them in class, and they tend to be a bit harder on them because of the image.
- Some teachers look out for immigrants just to give you trouble. They'll blame us instead of white kids and they never ask the white kids for passes. They always ask us.

- When African kids say that they want to apply to college, some teachers just tell you to go to SMCC not to regular college or classes. They don't look at your grades, just your color.
- Sometimes the lunch ladies treat us like we're a gang and we're going to jack something. They act like we can't buy the stuff. Every day they act like that with us, watching every thing we do. One day, someone is going to just blow up.
- When teachers see black people standing in the hall they think that something is going on. They always think we're bad or we're up to something. They're scared of us and they judge us because of how we dress, who we hang out with. They don't judge people by who they are but how they look. They don't want to take the time to understand us.
- Some teachers here won't release you for prayer. They don't understand it is very important for us.
- Teachers need to understand family issues. They need to understand that sometimes we have to help our families, we have responsibilities.
- Some teachers are so nice. They ask about your family, but some, they think that we're outsiders and messing up the school.

AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS

Many African American students were also particularly concerned about the treatment that they receive from faculty and staff. These students reported that they not only encounter degrading stereotypes from teachers, but that they are also frustrated by the limited depictions and representations of Blacks in class materials.

- Sometimes you get these stereotypes from teachers, like if you get an A they're surprised. And I see it and I just want to say if I was white you wouldn't be surprised.
- I was in class doing a project and the teacher came up to me and another black girl and asked if we wanted to make a rap. She didn't ask anyone else that. It was just because we're black.

- If you're in a high level class academically and you're black, they'll think that you need extra help. They're not asking the white kids who are in the back of the class sleeping.
- In class they'll put on a southern accent or mock Martin Luther King's style, and they just don't get it or they think it's funny. Or sometimes they'll talk in broken English to imitate slaves or they'll say that the Civil Rights Movement was just for blacks. I'm thinking, "No it wasn't! It was for *everyone*. You benefited too!"
- We learn about every president but we don't learn about how Black people shaped America. Then the stories you do here are about the violence. They hear the story of Emmett Till. Some kid in class said he deserved it. The teacher didn't even say anything.
- Except during Black history month, we only learn about White people, never any other races- no Asians, no Latinos, no other black people. They're part of our history too.

SECTION III ANALYSIS

It is important to state one caveat before discussing our analysis of the information we received in the focus groups. As previously stated, the Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence has had the opportunity to work with a variety of schools across the country. Despite this variety of experiences, we have never visited or worked in a school which has completely eliminated harassment. We believe, therefore, the fact that Portland High School students experience harassment is to be expected. It is also important to note that the information about harassment that we have collected from the focus groups we conducted at Portland High School falls well within the range of harassment we have found in the schools in which we have worked. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, Portland High School students portrayed an impressive, and relatively unique understanding of the dynamics of harassment, and an inspiring level of empathy and concern for their fellow students.

The students who participated in these focus groups did so with openness, honesty and sincerity. The information that they have provided provides a valuable framework by which to understand the dynamics of harassment at Portland High School. Please remember also, that while a considerable number of students participated in these focus group meetings these perspectives do not represent the perspectives of all students.

CONCERNS:

The information reported by both students in the focus groups raised issues involving harassment that are commonly faced by schools across the United States. However, the students described four areas that are of considerable concern.

Racial Ethnic and Immigrant Harassment: The extent of harassment directed at immigrants and students of color appears to be significant. We are especially concerned about the impact that such harassment is having on these students.

Sexual Harassment: The frequency of the sexual comments, slurs, and unwanted touching is of concern not only for the impact on girls but for the danger of escalation of sexual harassment to even more serious and destructive conduct.

Anti-Gay Harassment: The use of anti-gay slurs as insults appears to be prevalent, directed both at gay students and those perceived to be gay, as well as other students.

Religious Harassment: The level of anti-Jewish comments casually made by students is a matter of concern and gives rise to the concern of whether a Jewish student would be safe at the school.

SECTION IV CONCLUSION

We are very optimistic about the ability of Portland High School to create a climate in which every student is physically and emotionally safe. Our optimism arises from the perceptiveness and awareness of the students in the focus groups, their willingness to participate and their concern for their fellow students. Our optimism also arises from the strong commitment of Portland High School administrators, faculty and staff to create a school in which every single student feels safe and respected.

Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence

MISSION STATEMENT

The Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence (CPHV) was created in 1999 to prevent hate violence through education and civil rights advocacy.

CPHV creates and implements programs to assist institutions in preventing bias, harassment and violence and responding to incidents that have occurred.

CPHV works with businesses, non-profit organizations, schools, colleges, and law enforcement agencies, as well as many other communities.

Since its creation, the Center has provided hundreds of trainings throughout Maine, New England, and across the United States about preventing bias and harassment. CPHV has also implemented programs involving outreach and civil rights advocacy for members of targeted communities.

KEY PERSONNEL

Stephen L. Wessler

Stephen L. Wessler is the Director of the Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence at the University of Southern Maine. Mr. Wessler is also a research associate professor of social sciences within the College of Arts and Sciences

Mr. Wessler, an attorney, developed and directed the civil rights enforcement effort at the Maine Department of the Attorney General from 1992 to 1999. In 1996, Mr. Wessler developed with others the Civil Rights Teams Project, a hate violence prevention program conducted by the Attorney General's office, which is now in over 150 Maine middle and high schools. Mr. Wessler has conducted scores of trainings on preventing hate violence to educators, students, police officers and community members. Mr. Wessler participated in 1998 in the U.S. Department of Justice's Working Group that developed and piloted the National Hate Crimes Training Curriculum.

Mr. Wessler is a graduate of Harvard College and Boston University School of Law. He practiced law, both in the Attorney General's office and in private practice, for over 22 years before creating the Center in 1999.

Mr. Wessler has received recognitions or awards for his work in civil rights from the Maine Lesbian and Gay Political Alliance (1993), the Portland Branch of the NAACP (1994), the Jewish Federation of Southern Maine (1994), the Maine Civil Liberties Union (1996), the Maine Children's Alliance (1997), the Maine Education Association (1997), and GLAD (Gay & Lesbian Advocates and Defenders) (1999).

Dr. Lelia L. De Andrade

Lelia L. De Andrade is Associate Direct of the Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence. Dr. De Andrade joined the staff at the Center in the summer of 2002, and conducted several trainings for the Center in the preceding year.

Dr. De Andrade has a PhD in Sociology with a specialization in issues related to race, class, gender, and immigration. She has worked with a number of community organizations in southern New England, on building bridges between immigrant and American ethnic communities, and cultural preservation and promotion.

Dr. De Andrade taught college level courses for twelve years. She was on the faculty at Bowdoin College, in a joint position with the Sociology and Anthropology department and the Africana Studies Program. Dr. De Andrade also taught at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, and Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Dr. De Andrade has a B.A. from Rhode Island College. She earned both her Master's degree and her PhD at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. She was awarded a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the DuBois Institute at Harvard University (1997, 2000). She has received recognition for her work in the Cape Verdean community (2000) and for her achievement from Rhode Island College (1999). She lives in Portland Maine.