INTRODUCTION

In fall 2020, a working group of Illinois State Teachers of the Year and Teach Plus Policy Fellows met to address the issue of recruiting and retaining teachers of color and asked: are we recruiting from, and working to retain teachers in, schools that are safe and welcoming for people of color? Too often, they found, the answer was no, and a dramatic increase in racial harassment incidents in schools over the past five years[1] called for renewed focus on this problem. They drafted, shared, and revised a proposal that would call on school districts to devote the same level of attention to racial harassment as they already do to sexual harassment—because both are difficult to define, report, and investigate effectively.

This proposal became a draft bill known as the Racism-Free Schools Act, and in spring 2022 stakeholder feedback raised concerns about requiring teachers to complete training on racial harassment. In response, we decided to ask teachers how they felt about requiring new training on racial harassment, as well as their experiences with the issue of racial harassment.

Our research was driven by the following questions:
+ To what extent do teachers feel that racial harassment is a concern in their schools?
+ Do teachers feel that their schools are doing enough to address racial harassment?
+ How would teachers feel about a policy that required them to participate in training about racial harassment?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our poll revealed very strong support from educators for mandated training on racial harassment for all educators. In fact, teachers we polled were slightly less supportive of mandating that training but combining it with related topics to reduce the overall burden on teachers. Many of their comments went even further, calling for training to be longer, ongoing, in-person, or otherwise a significant investment of time and resources to address what they see as a serious issue. Most teachers in our sample agreed that racial harassment was a significant ongoing concern in their schools, and that schools are currently doing too little to address it. Responses were substantially similar across educators of different races and experience levels, and across regions of the state.

Given the strong support from educators, we recommend the Illinois legislature act now to require both clearer policies on racial harassment in schools and training to communicate them. The most common concern we heard from stakeholders was that the bill would add new training for teachers, but the overwhelming majority of teachers we polled across the state called for more training to address this issue they see every day but don't know how to address.

"This policy is long overdue and much needed."
- Black IEA Member, Chicago Suburbs

"Stop being afraid to approach this head-on."
- White IFT Member, Chicago Suburbs

Methodology

In March 2022, Teach Plus polled educators from across Illinois about racial harassment in their schools. The survey was shared with educators in the Teach Plus network and, through partnership with the Illinois Education Association (IEA), all members of that statewide union. 284 responses were collected, including 152 who indicated that they were IEA members.

School Setting

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Chicago	30	10.60
Chicago suburb	197	69.61
Downstate city	25	8.83
Downstate suburb	5	1.77
Rural	26	9.19
Total:	283	100

Respondents Who Identify as a Person of Color

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	107	38.63
No	156	56.32
Prefer not to say	14	5.05
Total:	277	100

Years of Teaching Experience

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than 4 years	33	11.62
4-9 years	45	15.85
10-15 years	86	30.28
More than 15 years	120	42.25
Total:	277	100

Union Membership

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Non-union	7	4.24
IEA	151	91.52
IFT	7	4.24
Total:	277	100

FINDINGS

1. **Teachers feel that racial harassment is a significant concern in their schools.**

In your school, to what extent is racial harassment a concern?

- 7.4% Not a concern
- 23.2% Major concern
- 28.5% Minor concern
- 40.8% Moderate concern
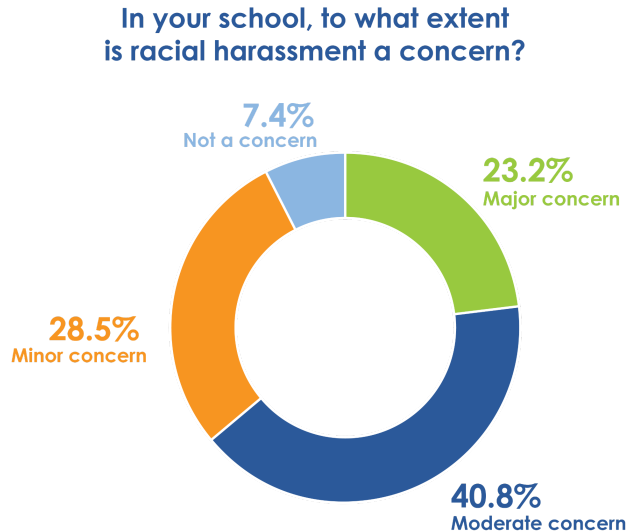
Teachers we polled agreed that racial harassment is a problem that needs to be addressed, with 93% of respondents indicating that racial harassment was a concern at some level in their schools and two-thirds labeling it a major or moderate concern.[2] Many teachers also noted that, without clear definitions, racial harassment is not always viewed as harassment.[3]

"Teachers and students of color need protection. You need to listen to and elevate the voices of black and brown educators."
- Multi-racial Teacher, Chicago

"I feel this is an issue that most people do not think is a problem when it is happening in their schools but they just do not recognize it as racial harassment." - Rural White Teacher

Notably, while more than a third of respondents suggested racial harassment was a minor or insignificant concern, fewer than 5% opposed training on racial harassment,[4] suggesting that those teachers who rarely see racial harassment in their own schools still recognize the need for training.

"While we have a majority white school, racial slurs are common and need to be addressed. Students do not realize the extent to which these slurs are hurtful because they are not exposed to the hurt it can cause."
- Rural White IEA Member

At the same time, educators we polled do not believe schools are doing enough to address racial harassment. Only one in 100 respondents believed districts were doing too much to support victims of racial harassment, while more than two thirds felt that their schools were doing too little.[5]

"We need to do more. Period."
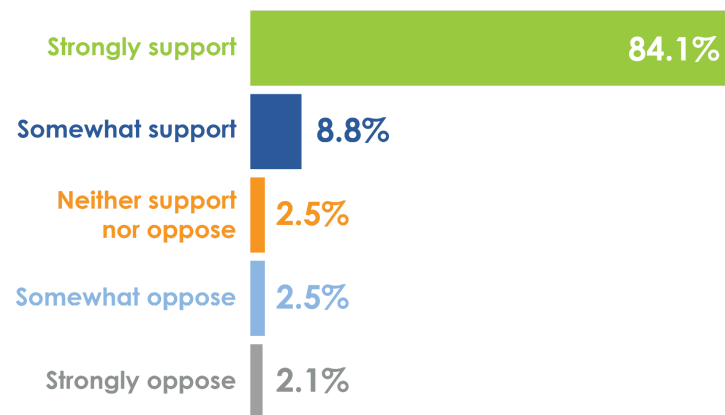- White Administrator, Chicago Suburbs

Do you believe that your district is doing enough to support victims of racial harassment?

- 1.1% Too much
- 32.1% The right amount
- 66.8% Too little

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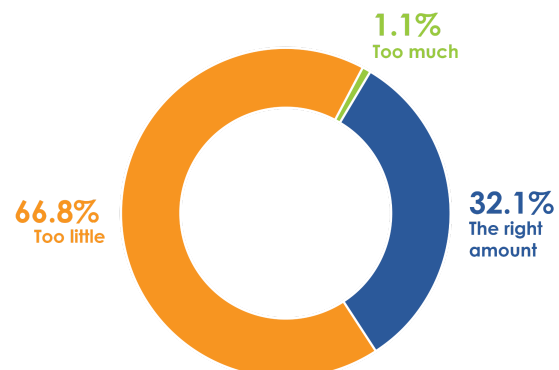
2. Teachers strongly support mandated training on racial harassment in schools

The vast majority of respondents (93%) supported requiring teachers be trained to identify and report racial harassment in addition to current mandated training, with 84% of respondents saying they "strongly support" such a requirement.[6]

Support for racial harassment-specific required training

Strongly support	84.1%
Somewhat support	8.8%
Neither support nor oppose	2.5%
Somewhat oppose	2.5%
Strongly oppose	2.1%

"Please make this mandatory. When you make this optional, then the people that really need the training opt out of it."
- Hispanic School Counselor, Chicago Suburbs

"Minimally, this brings awareness to the issue of racial harassment….With the knowledge comes power and responsibility to make the workplace and learning institution a safer space for everyone."
                                                                    - Rural White Educator

Many teachers stressed the urgency of such training, or voiced the need for clear definitions and procedures as well as explicit protections for victims.[7]

"It is imperative to make policies regarding racial harassment in schools and the community a priority…providing training to identify it and strategies to address it."
                                                    - African-American IEA Member, Chicago Suburbs

"We need clear guidelines on what qualifies as racial harassment because some people do not understand what it can look like. This training is just as needed as sexual harassment or bullying training."   - Arab-American Teacher, Downstate City
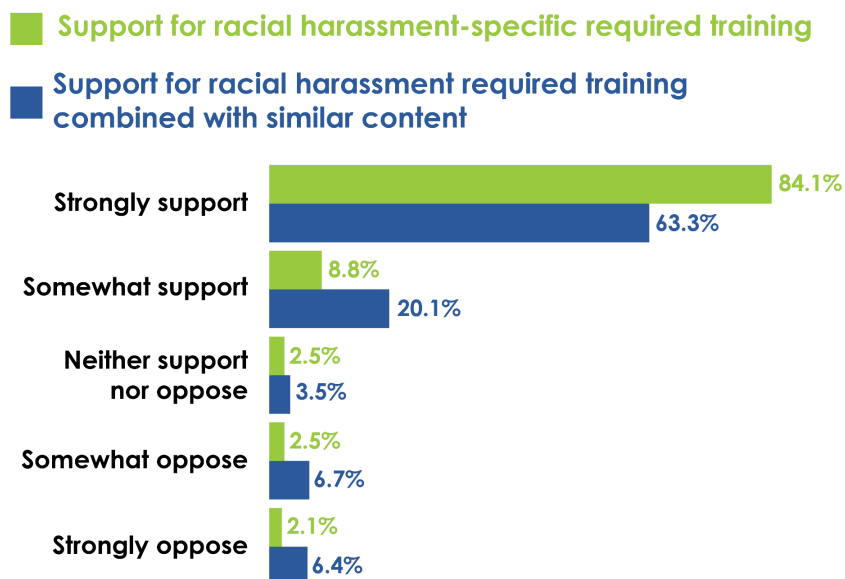
"Policies addressing racial harassment need to have explicit and clear protections for those reporting or those that are victims of racial harassment." - White Teacher, Chicago Suburbs

3. Teachers prefer racial harassment training not be combined with other topics.

Compared to a stand-alone training focused only on racial harassment, 20% fewer teachers strongly supported training combined with related topics like sexual harassment and bullying.[8] Many teachers commented that a combined training was not adequate to meet the need or address the unique concern of racial harassment in schools.[9]

■ **Support for racial harassment-specific required training**

■ **Support for racial harassment required training combined with similar content**

Strongly support	84.1%	
	63.3%	
Somewhat support	8.8%	
	20.1%	
Neither support nor oppose	2.5%	
	3.5%	
Somewhat oppose	2.5%	
	6.7%	
Strongly oppose	2.1%	
	6.4%	

"This issue is too complicated to consider one course enough. I am talking about adults learning how to walk in others' shoes. It should be ongoing training."

- African-American Teacher, Chicago

"I hope there can be more than just a combined module. I think for things to really change it needs to be more and ongoing." 		- White IEA Member, Chicago Suburbs

Many teachers went further, calling for deeper and more frequent training to address the roots of racial harassment.

"A training module online…becomes about compliance. There has to be something more substantive." 		- Black Teacher, Chicago Suburbs

"I would advise policymakers dig deeper than a module and certainly deeper than a combined module. I would advise that a genuine focus be in place for full ABAR (anti-bias, anti-racism) training for all staff…Until that changes, things will be downplayed and not reported."

- Rural Hispanic IEA Member

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **The legislature should ensure all districts have a clear and comprehensive policy specific to racial harassment.**

Because racist acts are often challenging to define, schools need to clarify thresholds for when bad behavior becomes racial harassment and outline procedures that ensure incidents can be reported safely. The Illinois School Code already requires similar policies for sexual harassment—a parallel requirement should exist for racial harassment, which is similarly difficult to define and identify.

2. **The legislature should mandate that all educators receive racial harassment training.**

Stronger policies cannot be effective unless educators understand how to implement them. Teachers in our poll acknowledge the need for this training, and are willing to commit the additional time to this critical topic to protect their students and colleagues.

3. **Training on racial harassment should not be combined with other topics.**

Training on racial harassment should not be combined with other topics. Despite the potential to save time by combining related topics into a single training, teachers we polled believe this would make the training less effective and would prefer to spend the additional time to get it right. Grants to districts could potentially address teachers' concerns that more and deeper learning is needed beyond compliance training to address root causes of racism, but at a minimum compliance training on racial harassment should stand alone.

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ENDNOTES

1. See https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-22-104341.pdf

2. Question: "In your school, to what extent is racial harassment a concern?" Responses: (n = 284) "Major concern" (23.2 percent), "Moderate concern" (40.8 percent), "Minor concern" (28.5 percent), "Not a concern" (7.4 percent).

3. Question: "What advice do you have for policymakers when it comes to addressing racial harassment in schools?" Open response question.

4. Question: "The required training for this bill would take the form of an online module, similar to that already required for sexual harassment, and teachers would need to refresh this training every other year. To what extent would you support a requirement that teachers receive training to identify and report racial harassment as a stand-alone module in addition to current training requirements?" Responses: (n = 283) "Strongly support" (84.1 percent), "Somewhat support" (8.8 percent), "Neither support nor oppose" (2.5 percent), "Somewhat oppose" (2.5 percent), "Strongly oppose" (2.1 percent).

5. Question: "Do you believe that your district is doing enough to support victims of racial harassment?" Responses: (n = 280) "My district is doing too much" (1.1 percent), "My district is doing the right amount" (32.1 percent), "My district is doing too little" (66.8 percent).

6. See endnote 4.

7. See endnote 3.

8. Question: "Because district policies and reporting procedures concerning racial harassment, sexual harassment, and bullying are likely to be similar, districts would be permitted to combine trainings with similar content into a single module. To what extent would you support a requirement that teachers receive training to identify and report racial harassment, if that content were combined with other similar training content into a single module?" Responses: (n = 283) "Strongly support" (63.3 percent), "Somewhat support" (20.1 percent), "Neither support nor oppose" (3.5 percent), "Somewhat oppose" (6.7 percent), "Strongly oppose" (6.4 percent).

9. See endnote 3.

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