It is my fear that the concerns of bullying and discriminatory harassment will be significantly increased in the next school year. It is important to recognize that this may very well increase the risks of youth suicide and school violence.

Why?

**Impact of Pandemic Learning**

Numerous reports from parents here in Oregon, through the Oregon Safe Return Facebook group, validated through a request for feedback on a major educator Facebook group, students who are normally bullied when at school have been enjoying remote instruction because the bullying largely went away.

Interestingly, there was not a reported increase in cyberbullying — demonstrating one of my theories, which is that cyberbullying between students is closely related to what is happening when students are at school.

In addition, many students who are neurodiverse, who are very frequently bullied, have been experiencing significant success in remote learning because they have not been in school environments that are difficult for them to maintain their attention and behaviors — and they have not been bullied or excluded.

Of significant concern is the emotional well-being of these students when they return to school to face the same hurtful treatment while in school and the same lack of effectiveness and lack of trust that reporting will make things better. They are likely to feel even more hopeless and helpless.

**Risks of Suicide**

Oregon remains 11th highest in the nation for youth suicide deaths. Being bullied is clearly a risk factor for suicide.

Taken together, findings from this meta-analysis support and extend the extant literature on the association between bullying involvement and suicidality. Consistent with 2 previous review articles and 1 meta-analysis, the current meta-analysis indicates that bullying involvement is associated with an increased risk for suicidality, and being a bully-victim is associated with greatest risk. Bullying and Suicidal Ideation and Behaviors: A Meta-Analysis (2015) M. K. Holt, A. M. Vivolo-Kantor, J.R. Polanin, K.M.H. Holland, S. DeGue, J.L. Matjasko, M. Wolfe, G. Reid, Pediatrics, www.pediatrics.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2014-1864.

**Suicide Associated with School Calendar**

Youth suicides increase during the school year and decrease over the summer.
We document a large decrease in youth suicide in during summer. Adults from a slightly older age ranges exhibit no summer decrease in suicide. The summer decline in youth suicide is not explained by weather, unemployment, or SAD. The increase rate of youth suicide during non-summer months aligns with school calendar. That increase may be indicative of broader stress experienced by youth in school. Back to school blues: Seasonality of youth suicide and the academic calendar, (2011) B. Hansen & M. Lang, Science Direct.

**Bullying Associated with School Violence**

It has long been known that both being bullied and engaging in bullying is strongly related to school violence.

Bullying others and being bullied were consistently related to each violence-related behavior for both boys and girls. Greater odds of involvement occurred with bullying others than being bullied, and greater odds of involvement occurred with bullying that took place away from school than that occurring in school, ... Bullying should not be considered a normative aspect of youth development, but rather a marker for more serious violent behaviors, including weapon carrying, frequent fighting, and fighting-related injury. Nansel, T.R., Overpeck, M.D., Haynie, D.L., Ruan, W.J., Schiedt, P.C. (2003) Relationships Between Bullying and Violence Among US Youth. Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med. 2003;157(4):348-353. doi:10.1001/archpedi.157.4.348

In addition, the most common variable of students who engage in school shootings is that they were badly bullied — and such bullying was not stopped by the school.

Students who were making plans to attack schools showed the same types of troubled histories as those who carried them out. They were badly bullied, often suffered from depression with stress at home and exhibited behavior that worried others, according to a U.S. Secret Service study released Tuesday that examined 67 thwarted school plots nationwide. Those warning signs are also found in many of the adults who commit mass shootings. Long, C. (2021) School plotters often are bullied, suffer from depression. AP. https://apnews.com/article/school-plotters-bullied-suffer-depression-9384152d8af45bd5da2c4060ecf2eae3

**Current Societal Discord**

The societal discord that has been generated by the last federal administration and the pent up anger of those in minority status due to the unending racial and sexual discrimination has clearly reached a boiling point. As is clearly evident by what is happening in some legislatures across the country, this is leading to a huge backlash in bills pending to place restrictions on transgender youth and restrictions on instruction that seeks to present a more accurate understanding of how minorities have been treated in our society.

While these arguments do not appear to be emerging in the Oregon Legislature, the Oregon Department of Education is making strong strides to focus on equity. In some regions of this state, this is likely to lead to backlash from the community.

This has already occurred related to a presentation by BIPOC educators in the Beaverton School District. Several staff members had made statements that were a bit edgy, but grounded the reality. Someone captured a video of this presentation and posted it on YouTube. Probably this person also notified Parents Defending Freedom, who contacted Fox News, resulting in an extremely biased news story attacking these educators, which resulted in attacks of these teachers from across the country which included death threats. The perspective of educators in the district is that these teachers have not been well-supported by their district. At this point in time, some educators are entirely frustrated, likely the BIPOC educators are entirely frustrated, and very likely the BIPOC families and students in the community are dismayed.

Next fall, this discord is likely to manifest in greater hurtful acts perpetrated against students who are in minority classes — as well as an increase in anger among targets and witnesses, which could lead to an increase in violent responses.
Hurtful to Achieve Social Status and Dominance

Insight provided to educators that those who engage in bullying are young people who are at risk in other ways is not entirely accurate. The National Research Council report, *Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy, and Practice*, addressed the issue of the nature of bullying behavior in its report:

There is evidence that supports a finding that individuals who bully others have contradictory attributes. Research suggests that there are children and adolescents who bully others because they have some form of maladjustment or ... are motivated by establishing their status in a social network. Consequently, the relation between bullying, being bullied, acceptance, and rejection is complex. This complexity is also linked to a stereotype held by the general public about individuals who bully. This stereotype casts children and youth who bully others as being high on psychopathology, low on social skills, and possessing few assets and competencies that the peer group values. Although some occurrence of this “stereotypical bully” or “classic bully” is supported by research, when researchers consider social status in relation to perpetration of bullying behavior, a different profile emerges. These studies suggest that most children and youth who bully others wield considerable power within their peer network and that high-status perpetrators tend to be perceived by peers as being popular, socially skilled, and leaders. High-status bullies have also been found to rank high on assets and competencies that the peer group values such as being attractive or being good athletes; they have also been found to rank low on psychopathology and to use aggression instrumentally to achieve and maintain hegemony. Considering these findings of contrasting characteristics of perpetrators of bullying behavior, it makes sense that the research on outcomes of perpetrating is mixed. Unfortunately, most research on the short- and long-term outcomes of perpetrating bullying behavior has not taken into account this heterogeneity when considering the impact to children and youth who have bullied their peers. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2016. Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy, and Practice. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

Faris and Felmlee explained as follows:

Clearly it is the strong who do the attacking: recent scholarship has debunked the traditional view of aggressive youth as socially marginal and psychologically troubled. Indeed, aggressors often possess strong social skills and harass their peers, not to reenact their own troubled home lives, but to gain status.¹

¹Aggression is highly related to dominance and territoriality. Most adolescents desire status, albeit to varying degrees, and this desire motivates much aggressive behavior: the more adolescents—or their friends—care about being popular, the more aggressive they become over time. Bullies appear to pursue status, as well as affection, as goals.

Popularity is associated with increased physical and relational aggression, behavior used to maintain social dominance. As social status increases, aggressive behavior escalates—at least until youth approach the pinnacle of the school hierarchy, when such actions are no longer required and aggression again declines. Faris, R. and Felmlee (2014) Casualties of Social Combat: School Networks of Peer Victimization and Their Consequences American Sociological Review 2014, Vol. 79(2) 228–257 (citations omitted).
Juvonen identified that students who were named by peers as the “coolest” were also often named the most hurtful and the ones engaging in spreading of rumors. This insight from Juvonen explains the ethological basis for this hurtful behavior:

Ethological research suggests that aggression is a strategy to establish a dominant position within a group. Among a number of species (e.g., various non-human primates), physical aggression enables attainment of a dominant position, such that the most powerful fighter (typically male) acquires a top position within a group and therefore gains access to valued resources. Within human youth, aggression can be considered a strategic behavior that serves similar social dominance functions. Juvonen, J. Wang, Y. and Espinoza, G. (2013) Physical Aggression, Spreading of Rumors, and Social Prominence in Early Adolescence: Reciprocal Effects Supporting Gender Similarities? J Youth Adolescence. 42:1801–1810.

This understanding of the two very different sources of bullying behavior is critically important in recognizing why the current approaches to reduce bullying have not demonstrated effectiveness.

However, there is another critically important aspect of this concern that will come into play in fall 2021. The hurtful acts that are motivated by an effort to establish their status in a social network very often come into play when students enter a new school level — enter middle school or high school. After their status has been established, often the levels of bullying show a decline.

This school year, the normal demonstration of hurtful behavior to establish social status was interrupted. Next fall, it can be predicted that students in the entering grades of a school level for this year and those in newly entering grades for a school level will be ending in hurtful behavior to achieve social status.

**How Effective Has Oregon’s Bullying Prevention Efforts Been?**

**Ineffectiveness Demonstrated by Survey Data**

Oregon schools have not achieve any success in reducing bullying. Note the following data from the 2019 Oregon Healthy Teen survey: In fact, if you look at the data on the Student Wellness Survey, the rate at which Oregon students report being bullied has not declined since the survey question was asked — in at least a decade.
Further Insight by Looking at Eugene 4J data

Further important insight can be found on a survey that has been conducted by the Eugene 4J school district. On the Oregon Healthy Teen survey, the results of 4J are similar to the state average. It can be assumed therefore that results similar to what was found in Eugene 4J would also be found in many districts.

On this survey, Eugene 4J asked both about “bullying” (hurtful behavior) and “harassment” (based on protected class). They also helpfully asked about frequency. I requested additional analysis of this data. (This demonstration is from a slideshow I created.)

As is quite evident, close to 9% of students reported that they are very frequently bullied or harassed once a week or more.

Student Reporting of Concerns

The 4J district reported that only 56% of all students said they would talk with a school staff person. I requested further data based on how likely students who were mistreated were to ask for help. This is what the data showed:
Clearly, one reason that Oregon’s bullying prevention statute is not providing the effective approach to reduce bullying is that student reporting of concerns is necessary. This is the foundation of the way in which the bullying prevention statute is supposed to work.

Why don’t students report? This question was answered by a study called the Youth Voice Project.

Students don’t report because this does not generally make things better — and quite often will make things worse.

The current level of effectiveness of the approach required under Oregon’s Bullying Prevention Statute is 10%. What grade would a student receive if they got the answers correct 10% of the time?

**Why What Schools are Doing is Not Working**

**Oregon’s Bullying Prevention Statute**

Oregon’s results in policies that are incorporated into the school’s disciplinary code. When principals are interpreting these policies in the context of an alleged violation, they most often look to see if the actions of a student constituted a substantial disruption. This is a disciplinary code, thus the focus of the principal upon a report of bullying is to find whether the student violated the policy.

Because this is a disciplinary matter, the principal will not be able to tell the student, or the student’s parents if they are notified, what was found because of privacy laws.

Also, schools are required to file an annual report of disciplinary actions — with the intent to decrease the number of suspensions. Therefore, principals are very inclined to not want to determine that an act of bullying occurred.

Things could be worse. In some states, schools are required to make a public report of bullying incidents. One recent year, in New York City Schools, where this public reporting requirement exists, 71% of the schools reported zero bullying incidents. Fortunately, Oregon does not have this public reporting requirement.

Note specifically the data from Eugene 4J. Those 8.76% of students who reported being treated badly once a week or more were very likely not experiencing hurtful treatment that constituted a
substantial disruption. They were most likely experiencing a series of hurtful acts that in and of themselves were not that significant, but together was creating a hostile educational environment.

But because of the way that Oregon’s bullying prevention statute is worded, the focus of the principal is on whether one act caused the enumerated harms.

Oregon’s bullying prevention statute does not require actions that are in accord with the regulations under the federal civil rights laws. Under these civil rights laws, a hostile environment exists when hurtful conduct is sufficiently severe, pervasive, or persistent so as to interfere with or limit a student’s ability to participate in or benefit from the services, activities, or opportunities offered by the school. A school must investigate concerns about which it knows or reasonably should have known. The investigation should be prompt, thorough, and impartial.

If an investigation reveals a hostile environment exists, a school must take prompt and effective steps reasonably calculated to end the harassment, prevent it from recurring, remedy the harm to the target, and correct and eliminate any hostile environment. Unfortunately, these more effective steps are only required in responding to the hurtful treatment of students within protected classes.

Under Section 504 and IDEA schools must ensure that students with disabilities receive a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Bullying or harassment of student with a disability on any basis can result in a denial of FAPE that must be remedied. A hostile environment will essentially constitute a denial of FAPE. In situations where students with disabilities are being or engaging in bullying and this is interfering with FAPE, the school must fully address the concerns in an Individual Education Plan (IEP) or Section 504 Team Meeting.

I have asked all of the institutions of higher education in the state if they are addressing this in the training for school administrators. Apparently, this is not addressed. Further, within the context of a course on educational law it is unlikely that the way in which this is addressed will not focus on aspects of how to end the harassment, remedy the harm, or correct the hostile environment.

The predicted enactment of HB 2697, which has applaudable objectives, will be significant confusion over how a principal is required to respond. If a student reports that someone was hurtful, does the principal respond in accord with the bullying statute, federal civil rights laws, or the new Every Student Belongs Act. The new Every Student Belongs Act unfortunately left out caucasian students.

Inadequate Understanding of Bullying Behavior

The above insight into the nature of bullying behavior also is the basis for why what Oregon’s schools are doing is not working. When principals do not fully understand these dynamics of hurtful behavior, by the students they perceive as leadership students, they are not going to effectively respond. Prevention efforts that are focused on students who are more at risk, will do nothing to address this behavior. When being hurtful appears to be supported within the environment, being hurtful will continue.

Three additional issues appear to also be implicated in increased levels of hurtful behavior.

Punishment and use of authoritative power over students who have engaged in misbehavior reinforces the idea that those who have power are able to dominate others and cause them to suffer. In other words, the punishment by authority approach models bullying behavior.

Another factor that has not received sufficient attention is the hurtful treatment of students by staff. Like student-on-student bullying, staff bullying is an abuse of power that tends to be chronic and involves degrading a student, often in front of other students.

There are usually no negative consequences for teachers who engage in bullying. Students who are targeted often are vulnerable, have some devalued personal attribute, are unable to stand up for themselves, and others will not defend them. Frequently, there are references to how this student differs from other students who are more capable or valued. As a result, the student may also become a target by peers. As explained:

Students who are bullied by teachers typically experience confusion, anger, fear, self-doubt, and profound concerns about their academic and social competencies. Not knowing why he or she has been targeted, or what one must do to end the bullying, may well be among the most personally distressing aspects of being singled out and treated unfairly. Over time, especially if no one in authority intervenes, the target may come to blame him or her self for the abuse and thus feel a pervasive sense of helplessness and worthlessness. McEvoy, A. (2005). Teachers who bully students: Patterns and policy implications. Paper presented at the Hamilton Fish Institute’s Persistently Safe Schools Conference, Philadelphia, PA.

While there is no research on this point, my opinion is that the perspective demonstrated by the district athletic department and community sports leagues play a significant role encouraging or discouraging hurtful behavior. If these programs maintain a toxic masculinity, highly competitive approach, it is likely that the rate of bullying in the schools is higher. If the focus is on skill building and teamwork, the rate of bullying is likely lower.

What Can Be Done?

I have outlined these issues and research-based strategies to address these concerns in my book Engage Students to Embrace Civility. I am available for consulting or workshops.

This book was published in 2018. If I were to rewrite it this year, I would more proactively integrate insight into trauma informed practices.

It is of significant concern to me that while some approaches to mention bullying, none of them focus on the true extent of the concern. Most of the attention is on the kinds of adversities students experience in their homes or the community. The adversities they are experiencing while they are at school are more frequently ignored. Being treated badly by students or staff is a form of trauma.

If the primary adversities students were experiencing were in the home and community and not in school, then the suicide rate of young people would increase when they are outside of school. This is not the case. It is irresponsible, in my opinion, for schools that say they are focusing on trauma informed practices to not also be addressing the adversities students are experiencing while at school.

It is IMPOSSIBLE to implement effective trauma informed practices without also changing the manner in which your school addresses bullying — because the current approach is not working.