

# RECLAIMING BELONGING IN A CLIMATE OF HARASSMENT

## ISSUES OF AGENCY AND BELONGING – A STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

*School is the most common developmental setting that nearly all children and youth experience. Schools are clearly recognized as places to facilitate learning – but most students will tell you that there is far more to school than the formal curriculum and that navigating the “unspoken” curriculum can be just as challenging as any content that might be on a test.*

*This story – written from a student perspective by Emanuelle Sippy, a student organizer from Lexington, KY – is about efforts to change the climate around sexual harassment and assault in schools. **Physical and psychological safety precede a genuine, robust sense of belonging** in schools and other learning settings. Far too often, students experience many forms of attack against that non-negotiable condition for optimal learning and development; however, young people can also display a deep sense of agency and make positive change in their environment. This story captures an example of youth-led change, including the wide range of responses to youth-led action by adults within and outside of the school setting.*

---

“ I was violated by his harassment. I was a bystander. I should have spoken up sooner.

I listened to commentary on our clothing, as he dictated who was dressed appropriately and who wasn't.

I heard her laugh in response to him.

I was a foot away when he announced which freshman girl had the best butt.

I was runner up for an arbitrary title from someone I don't respect, something I didn't want. And yet a disturbed part of me was pleased.

I saw him stare at my best friend's breasts; listened as he pontificated about their size.

I was disgusted. I wasn't scared. Yet, I still didn't say “Stop.”

I watched as he grabbed another friend's thigh. I stood idly by while the conversation continued.

I didn't think any of this was okay, but he made it seem normal. He said these things as casually as he talked about memes, politics, sports, and classwork.

He was a senior. We were all freshmen. We didn't say stop. I wanted to; I could have. I didn't.

None of us did, not until later, when prompted by an older, male friend. When the perpetrator tried to take a video up my friend's skirt, she then said no. When he sent nudes on Snapchat, they then blocked him. We waited, which was neither a request for him to continue nor an order imploring him to stop.”

**Most students aren't taught to identify and act upon their own agency**, but youth aren't the only population letting what is habitual become acceptable. When friends and I reported instances of sexual harassment and assault, our administration's solution was to limit interaction between us and the perpetrator.

We attempted to articulate that separation did not begin to solve the problem because there were a multitude of other victims in the building, but we were speaking to people who pretended to listen.

Administrators weren't willing to discuss physical and emotional boundaries or the implications of sending and requesting nudes. They refused to engage in conversation about a preventative approach, perpetuating a continuation of the status quo where students scarcely confide in adults and rarely recognize powerlessness in each other.



Both a teacher and assistant principal – the only female administrator in the school, who mentioned stories of her own – had the audacity to tell us, there would be no more interaction between us and him. As if that solved the problem. As if we were reassured by it. As if there weren't a multitude of other folks dehumanized in the building alone.

That was their response after talking to four young women separately, all affected by one man. That was their response after reading a description that detailed every problematic instance we could remember.

When my friend and I went back to the assistant principal who had talked to us and the perpetrator, we asked what they had said to him. Initially we were told he would be reprimanded. She then said it was not our prerogative to know anything. Wasn't there at least a system or a protocol? The phone rang, and she shoed us out.

But we weren't asking for a transcription of their conversation or an inventory of his punishment. We wanted to know how these situations were handled because we didn't want anyone else to experience what we had.

We were met with deaf ears and people who pretended to listen. They didn't understand our concern for ourselves was miniscule compared to our desire that sexual harassment and assault stop scathing our peers.



Later, a junior told me her butt is grabbed at least once or twice a week in the hallway.

Without hesitation, she responded to my question of how the perpetrators make her feel.

“Like I am not human,” reminding us that inanimate objects cannot feel.

Our school never provided guidelines about how students should report or respond to harassment and assault. We hadn't heard the words sexual harassment or assault uttered by a teacher or administrator until we said them first.

*After months of working with researchers who are experts in trauma informed care, Celia, another high school student in Emanuelle's district, crafted a survey asking questions about peers' experiences with sexual harassment and assault. Wanting to disseminate it throughout her school, Celia got approval from her principal. Just a few weeks later, the principal pulled out, citing concerns over students' emotional health as a justification. Celia was determined to gather data on the subject and didn't let this stop her. She teamed up with Emanuelle and other [Kentucky Student Voice Team](#) members, who together garnered almost 1,000 responses via word-of-mouth and social media – independent of their schools or district. [The results](#) were alarming, gaining traction in [Teen Vogue](#) and in [local outlets](#), where you can see the principal acted like he had supported the effort all along. Used to working inside the school setting and preaching the power of doing so to others, the team had to leverage cross-system connections to make change in this instance – demonstrating the power of an ecosystem approach and underscoring the non-linear path of this work.*

the  
**forum**  
FOR YOUTH INVESTMENT

The Equitable Ecosystem for Youth and Young Adults Working Group was facilitated by the Forum for Youth Investment with generous support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.