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N.J. hate crimes are rising. How do you fight racism in the classroom?

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In recent years, Nicola Straker has seen an uptick of racist graffiti in schools.

Straker works for the Anti-Defamation League, and regularly meets with area administrators about how to respond. School leaders want to do the right thing, she said. But they often feel paralyzed.

“In many instances, they’re not exactly sure what that ‘right thing’ is,” she said.

Straker spoke in New Brunswick Wednesday about combating prejudice in the classroom, at a hearing organized by New Jersey’s new Interagency Task Force to Combat Youth Bias.

The discussion took place just a day after new data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation showed that more than 500 hate crimes occurred in New Jersey last year, an increase from the year before.

Rachel Apter, director of the state’s civil rights division, said they were seeing more kids bullying others because of religion, race and gender.

“What can we be doing differently?” she asked the 30 people gathered at a Chabad House, a Jewish student center by Rutgers University.

Tracking bias can be difficult, because the data has historically been flawed. Nonetheless, more incidents are being reported in New Jersey, and state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal has previously warned of a “rising tide of hate.”

Educators, cops and lawyers discussed the fine line school staff have to walk when responding to prejudice. Many said that while in-depth training for kids and teachers could help, that training cost time and money that some schools don’t have.

Elissa Zylbershlag, who teaches anti-bias workshops for the New Jersey State Bar Foundation, said teachers were overwhelmed even without the prospect of burgeoning racism.

“They are tasked with having to handle issues that they’re not prepared to handle,” she said.

Just last week, Apter's office sharply criticized the Monmouth County Vocational School District for not doing more to protect a Jewish girl from years of anti-Semitic harassment. In one instance, a teacher removed a rock with the word "Adolf" on it that had allegedly been placed near the girl's desk, but the teacher didn't report it to authorities.

The district now faces possible fines for potentially breaking New Jersey's anti-discrimination law. Chris Widmer, the district's director of technology, wrote in an email that they take the findings "very seriously, and fully cooperated with (the) investigation."

He wrote that the district hopes to be able to resolve the concerns.

The task force will also hold hearings Nov. 20 in Toms River, Nov. 21 in Bridgeton and Nov. 25 in Hackensack.

It plans to release a report with recommendations by February.