

Sexual Harassment in the Schools

A Blueprint for Action

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The following are some things you can do to prevent and respond to sexual harassment in your school.

All Schools

- Every school should have a policy against sexual harassment that is easy to understand and widely distributed. It should include strong statements from school administrators that harassment will not be tolerated.
- The policy should clearly explain how to file a complaint and how the complaint will be handled. There should be several people who can receive complaints. Those designated to receive complaints should be specially trained, but all teachers and staff need to know how to respond if a student comes to them.
- There must be procedures for speedy, fair, confidential investigations with appropriate punishments.
- The policy should state that retaliation -- punishing someone for making a complaint -- will not be tolerated. If the harasser or others try to get back at the complainant, they should be punished.
- If an incident involves physical contact, the school should treat it as it would any other crime on campus and should also inform the complainant that she has the right to file charges with the police.
- The curriculum at all grade levels should discuss respect for others, sexual harassment and violence. Students should be taught appropriate ways to treat each other and how to bring an effective complaint if they experience harassment.
- Colleges and universities should require first-year students and student leaders to attend programs about sexual harassment.
- Teachers and staff should receive special professional education to increase their awareness and explain their duties regarding their own behavior and how to respond when they witness harassment or receive student complaints.
- Hold a school assembly or campus teach-in on the topic and invite a speaker.
- Provide resources on sexual harassment in the school library, guidance office, student health center or other accessible areas.

- Encourage students to start a student group to address harassment and related issues.

Advice for Student Advocates in Elementary and Secondary Schools

- Don't wait until you are harassed personally. Work to change your school's policies and educational atmosphere NOW.
- Organize with friends, and maybe some sympathetic teachers. Go to your principal and ask that she implement a policy. Explain how harassment interferes with your education and makes you feel uncomfortable and unsafe. Remind the principal that she has an obligation under the law to stop harassment and to institute appropriate policies and procedures.
- If the principal doesn't believe that harassment is a problem, show her the AAUW surveys referenced in these materials. If she just thinks it isn't a problem in your school, gather information. Conduct your own informal survey. Maybe you can get your school newspaper to help.
- If your principal still doesn't do anything, ask your parents to talk to her. To reach a lot of parents, you and your friends can request time to discuss harassment at the next PTA meeting.
- If none of these tactics work, ask for time to present your views at a school board meeting. Stress the ways that harassment hurts girls and their education, as well as the fact that the school system has a legal duty to act and could lose a lot of money if a lawsuit is ever filed. Since arranging to speak to the school board might be difficult, you may need to get help from an adult.
- You can alert the school to particular problems, such as a teacher who acts inappropriately or an area of the school where incidents often occur. You can also take group action. Agree to come to the aid of any girl you see being harassed. Help girls who have been harassed to bring complaints to the school's attention. Get a group of girls and boys to verbally confront a harasser and tell him why his actions are wrong.
- Raise consciousness. Put up flyers about harassment. Flyers can define harassment, inform students of their rights or explain the difference between flirting and harassment -- get other ideas from resource materials. Wear t-shirts with anti-harassment slogans. Ask the student government to devote time to the issue. Ask school administrators if you can invite a speaker to your school.
- Reach out to students at other schools. Share ideas and resource materials about sexual harassment. Contact organizations in your area that work on these issues.

Organizing Against Sexual Harassment on College Campuses

- Organize. There's power in numbers. Enlist the aid of professors, fraternities, sororities, student government organizations and campus racial, ethnic and religious organizations such as Hillel, Women's Centers, Asian-American student unions and campus ministries. Encourage these organizations to sponsor, publicize and conduct programs about sexual harassment. Approach administrators as a group to demand the necessary

policy changes.

- Administrators may recognize that sexual harassment is a general societal problem but be blind to it as a problem on their own campus. To focus the issue, create a campus-wide task force to gather information about sexual harassment on campus through surveys and focus groups, evaluate policies and procedures for addressing sexual harassment complaints and recommend improvements to school administrators. Publish the task force findings in the school newspaper.
- Ensure that sexual harassment issues are incorporated into new student orientation and existing educational programs such as sexual assault and diversity programs. Develop new educational programs.
- Raise consciousness. Develop and distribute flyers, posters and educational pamphlets about harassment.
- Gain the support of campus athletes and sports teams. Ask prominent school athletes to publicly condemn sexual harassment.

What to Do If You Are Harassed

- You are not to blame for sexual harassment. Sexual harassment may frighten or embarrass you. Before you decide what action you want to take, discuss the problem with your parents or another adult, a roommate or a friend you trust.
- If you feel safe and comfortable doing so, tell the harasser that his behavior bothers you and that you want him to stop. If the harasser is a teacher or other adult, you probably should not confront him alone. Another alternative is to write a letter that describes the behavior and says that it bothers you and you want it to stop. You might want to attach a copy of your school's sexual harassment policy to your letter. Keep a copy of your letter.
- If you don't feel ready to make a complaint, keep notes about the harassment: what happened, when, where, who else was present. Keep these notes separate from your diary or any other personal papers, in case you need to show your notes to someone else.
- When you're ready to complain, go to a trusted individual designated by your school policy. If your school has no policy or you feel uncomfortable talking to the designated people, go to a faculty member, guidance counselor, administrator or health educator. If you're scared, bring a friend or a parent.
- It may be harder and more intimidating to bring a complaint about a teacher or faculty member. You might want to bring a parent or supportive adult. Realize that you will probably face resistance if you complain about a teacher or professor. Gather as much support as possible from others who have witnessed the harassment. Think through what you would like the result of your complaint to be. Do you simply want your harasser to stop the harassment, or do you think he or she has engaged in behavior so egregious that he or she should be removed from teaching? Because the teacher may have tenure, it could take time to get him or her removed. Before you bring your complaint, think through suggestions you can make for avoiding the faculty member after the complaint, such as transferring from the class or independent study just in case the school refuses to remove him or her during the investigation.

- If the school doesn't resolve your complaint in a way that satisfies you, you have the right to file a complaint with the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights or to bring a lawsuit. As discussed in the section on Filing a Lawsuit earlier in this Legal Resource Kit, you must make your complaint of sexual harassment to a school official who is in a position to discipline the harasser in order to safeguard your legal claim for monetary damages under Title IX. You may want to notify officials both in your school and at the district office.
- The school has no legal obligation to fire a teacher or expel a student who has harassed you. Its obligation is simply to stop the harassment. You have no legal right under Title IX to have the harasser "punished." In all likelihood, the school will refuse to tell you the outcome of your complaint. The school may take the position that the Federal Educational Records Privacy Act prevents it from telling you if a student harasser has even been punished. However, the Office of Civil Rights of the Department of Education asserts that you should be informed of whether a finding of harassment has been made because it impacts you. Moreover, the OCR asserts that your school may adopt a harassment policy or disciplinary code that gives you additional rights.