

How to Keep Girls in School: Recommendations to Address the Dropout Crisis

The National Women's Law Center's new report, *When Girls Don't Graduate, We All Fail: A Call to Improve High School Graduation Rates for Girls*, demonstrates that there is a dropout crisis for girls in our nation's schools. One of every four girls fails to complete her high school diploma in four years, and the numbers are worse for girls of color. These dropout patterns result in severe economic consequences for girls and their families. Compared to their male peers who drop out of school, girls who do not complete high school experience higher rates of unemployment, earn significantly lower wages, and are more likely to need to rely on public support programs to provide for their families.

Schools can and must do more to reduce the dropout rates of their male *and* female students. While many of the recommendations in the Center's report address elimination of barriers that have been shown to be particularly significant for girls, many will also benefit students of both genders.

For ease of reference, the following lists identify those portions of the Center's recommendations that should be implemented by (a) policymakers; (b) school personnel; and (c) students, parents and their advocates.

Recommendations for Federal and/or State Policymakers

There are numerous ways that federal and state policymakers can help to provide the support that students need to stay in school. Policymakers should:

- Fund research on the dropout crisis that further explores whether the risk factors for dropping out, and the most efficacious interventions for avoiding those risks, are the same for boys and girls. Such research should rely on data that are fully disaggregated by sex, race, and other relevant criteria.
- Adopt a common definition of "dropouts" for all data collection, analysis and reporting requirements, and require that all data be fully cross-tabulated to allow analysis of subgroups of students. States and local governments should also implement, and the federal government should fund, identifier systems to enable longitudinal tracking of individual students.
- Develop intervention strategies that are tailored to the different needs of girls and boys of all races and ethnicities, based on the distinct experiences of these students and enhanced research and data collection.
- Add to the No Child Left Behind Act a reasonable graduation rate floor as part of the school assessment process, with a rigorous standard for exceptions.
- Require that schools separately track pregnant and parenting students in their graduation and dropout data.

- Provide funding and leadership to develop, document, and evaluate a range of dropout prevention program models targeting pregnant and parenting teens, and develop and support practitioner networks to provide technical assistance to existing programs.
- Enhance interpretations and enforcement of anti-discrimination and education laws to:
 - Protect pregnant or parenting students from discrimination;
 - Ensure that girls are encouraged and able to enroll in and complete career and technical education courses that are nontraditional for their gender;
 - Fully protect students from sexual harassment, bullying, and other forms of violence in school;
 - Provide girls equal opportunities to participate in school-based athletics programs; and
 - Ensure that schools appoint, and broadly publicize information about, a Title IX coordinator and adopt anti-discrimination policies and grievance procedures to address any sex discrimination complaints.
- Enact or enforce legislation or regulations that will provide more protection for girls in schools by:
 - Ensuring that schools are held properly accountable for harassment of their students.
 - Requiring high schools to maintain and report data on the gender breakdown of their athletics teams and the treatment of girls' and boys' athletics programs.

Recommendations for Educators and School Personnel

School personnel must ensure that they comply with applicable anti-discrimination and education laws. In order to do so – and to institute proactive measures to help keep girls in school – schools should:

- Survey students who drop out of school about the reasons for their decisions.
- Adopt intervention strategies that are targeted to meet the needs of girls as well as boys.
- Provide accommodations and interventions to help support pregnant and parenting students, including:
 - Offering access to special services, such as social services and child care; classes in parenting skills, prenatal care, and child development; and/or support groups or mentoring programs;
 - Authorizing special scheduling and attendance arrangements, such as allowing absences for medical or child care needs, providing at-home tutoring, or permitting schoolwork to be done from home or at night;
 - Providing necessary physical accommodations (such as larger desks);
 - Conducting special outreach efforts to re-enroll students who have already dropped out of school;
 - Ensuring that pregnant and parenting students are offered the full range of academically rigorous courses and extracurricular activities provided to their peers;
 - Separately tracking the graduation and dropout rates of pregnant and parenting students; and
 - Creating individualized graduation plans for pregnant and parenting students.

- Take proactive steps to encourage girls to pursue and complete career and technical education programs and courses that are nontraditional for their gender and that lead to high-wage, high-skill occupations.
- Establish, disseminate, and vigorously enforce strong sexual harassment and anti-discrimination policies and procedures for complaining about harassment and other forms of discrimination.
- Ensure that girls have equal opportunities to participate in sports and that their teams are treated equitably in the benefits and services they receive.
- Appoint, and broadly publicize information about, a Title IX coordinator, an anti-discrimination policy, and a grievance procedure to address discrimination complaints.

Recommendations for Students, Parents and Advocates

Students, parents and their advocates can help to address the barriers and risks that lead students to drop out by doing the following, among other things:

- Hold schools responsible for compliance with the law by knowing their responsibilities and advocating for remedies to identified problems. Ensuring that girls have access to all educational activities is an important part of keeping girls in school. The Center has numerous materials to enable students and their advocates to evaluate their schools' compliance with anti-discrimination laws, including in the areas of:
 - Athletics,
 - Career and technical education,
 - Sexual harassment, and
 - Treatment of pregnant and parenting students.
- Keep an eye out for, and report, any instances of:
 - Sexual harassment, bullying, and/or other forms of violence in school.
 - Denial of equal access to career and technical education classes on the basis of sex.
 - Unfair treatment of girls in athletics teams or the school sports program as a whole.
 - Discrimination against pregnant or parenting students.
 - Other forms of sex discrimination.
- If there are problems at school, speak up! Take steps to address any concerns that you have by contacting the school's administration.

For more information about the girls' dropout problem, please see *When Girls Don't Graduate* at www.nwlc.org/dropout and feel free to contact the National Women's Law Center at info@nwlc.org.