



NATIONAL  
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LAW CENTER

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# 100 SCHOOL DISTRICTS: Student Toolkit

**HOW TO CHANGE YOUR SCHOOL'S SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICIES**

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# WELCOME!

## DEAR READER,

Thank you for picking up the *100 School Districts: Student Toolkit!* We'd like to take a moment to share with you why we created the 100 School Districts project.

This project was inspired by the 'me, too.' movement started by Tarana Burke in 2006 to help Black and brown girls talk about sexual violence. In 2018, after #MeToo went viral globally, we and about 300 other organizations wrote a **full-page letter** in the *New York Times* about sexual violence and other forms of sexual harassment. In this letter, we asked for "100 school districts" across the country to be leaders in protecting students from sexual harassment, especially students of color and other marginalized students.

To help school districts stop sexual harassment, we wrote the **100 School Districts** report, which recommended 12 key policies. Then, we created this student toolkit to help students like you push your school district to adopt those 12 policies. We hope this toolkit will help you understand what sexual harassment is, what your rights are at school, and how to fight for better policies in your school district.

You inspire us with your courage and dedication.

With love and solidarity,  
National Women's Law Center & Girls for Gender Equity

**CONTENT WARNING:** This toolkit covers topics that can be difficult for readers, such as sexual harassment, sexual assault, child sexual abuse, dating violence, and other identity-based harassment or violence. We encourage you to care for your safety and well-being.



# SEXUAL HARASSMENT

## WHAT IS SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

Sexual harassment is any **unwanted** sexual conduct, such as:

- Unwanted sexual “jokes,” slurs, rumors, or “catcalling”
- Unwanted sexual messages, pictures, or videos
- **Sexual violence:** unwanted physical sex acts, such as unwanted kissing and touching of private body parts, including rape
- **Dating violence:** insults, threats, violence, or stalking from someone you are dating or used to date
- **Child sexual abuse:** any romantic or sexual relationship between a student and an adult, **even if the student likes the adult or wants the relationship**

Sexual harassment can happen in many places, such as:

- In a physical or online classroom
- During a school activity (in a locker room, on a bus ride, on a field trip, etc.)
- At a student or teacher’s house
- In a text message, email, or on social media

Anyone can be sexually harassed: girls, boys, and students of other gender identities. Anyone can be a harasser: students, adults, and people from other schools.

Too many students in the United States face sexual harassment:

- 56% of girls and 48% of boys in grades 7-12 have been sexually harassed.<sup>1</sup>
- One in five girls ages 14-18 have been kissed or touched without their consent.<sup>2</sup>
- Students of color, LGBTQ students, pregnant or parenting students, and students with disabilities are more likely to face sexual harassment or violence.<sup>3</sup>

## WHY DO SCHOOLS NEED BETTER SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICIES?

### **Schools should make it easy for students to report sexual harassment.**

Some students don't report sexual harassment because they are ashamed or think it's their fault—even though being harassed is *never* your fault. Others don't report because they are afraid of not being believed, making their harasser angry, being seen as a “snitch,” getting in trouble at school, getting in trouble with adults at home, or getting in trouble with police or immigration officials. And some students don't report sexual harassment because they don't know that the law requires their schools to help them. Schools should make it very clear to students that they take sexual harassment seriously, as the law requires.

### **Schools should never ignore or punish students who ask for help.**

Unfortunately, some schools fall short here. Some students are punished because their school thinks they had “consensual” sex or made a “false” report. Other students are punished for drinking or violating a school rule during their assault, for fighting back against a harasser, for missing school to avoid a harasser, or for just telling other students about what happened. Schools are more likely to ignore or punish girls of color (especially Black girls), LGBTQ students, pregnant or parenting students, and students with disabilities.

### **When schools don't take action to stop sexual harassment, it's harder for students to succeed in school.**

Students who have been sexually harassed more likely to miss class, have trouble studying, and get lower grades. They are also more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, an eating disorder, and/or self-harm.

### **School districts need better policies to prevent and respond to sexual harassment! You can help make a difference in your school district.**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aauw.org/research/crossing-the-line>, page 11.

<sup>2</sup> <https://nwlc.org/resources/stopping-school-pushout-for-girls-who-have-suffered-harassment-and-sexual-violence>, page 3.

<sup>3</sup> <https://nwlc.org/resources/stopping-school-pushout-for-girls-who-have-suffered-harassment-and-sexual-violence>, page 3; <https://nwlc.org/resources/stopping-school-pushout-for-lgbtq-girls>, page 3; <https://nwlc.org/resources/stopping-school-pushout-for-girls-who-are-pregnant-or-parenting>, page 12; <https://nwlc.org/resources/stopping-school-pushout-for-girls-with-disabilities>, page 7.



# KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

## WHAT IS TITLE IX?

Title IX is a federal civil rights law that requires your school district to help you when you report sexual harassment. Under Title IX, your school district must have an adult called the **“Title IX coordinator”**—their job is to help students who report sexual harassment. If you’ve been sexually harassed, you have the right to “supportive measures” and, if you want one, an investigation.

**Supportive measures:** Your school must offer you “supportive measures” or “accommodations” to help you feel safe and learn. For example:

- If you don’t feel safe at school, your school can change your harasser’s schedule in classes, in hallways, at lunch, in school activities, and/or on the bus to keep them away from you.
- If sexual harassment has made it harder for you to learn, your school can give you counseling, tutoring, excused absences, extra time on homework or tests, and/or let you redo homework or retake a test.
- Your school must make sure you are not bullied or punished for reporting the sexual harassment. (This sort of bullying or punishment is called “retaliation”.)

**An investigation:** If you ask for an investigation, your school must start investigating right away, even if there is a separate police investigation. Then, it must tell you in writing about its decision, how it will keep you safe, and how you can appeal its decision.

## HOW DO I REPORT SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

All schools are required by Title IX to have an option for filing a formal complaint (see Option 3). Some schools may also have options for anonymous and/or confidential reporting (see Options 1 and 2).

### OPTION 1: MAKE AN ANONYMOUS REPORT

Some schools have an “anonymous reporting” option that lets students report sexual harassment without sharing their name or contact info. If your school has this option, you can use it to let them know that sexual harassment is a problem at your school, even if you don’t want them to know who you are.

### OPTION 2: MAKE A CONFIDENTIAL REPORT

Some schools have a “confidential reporting” option that lets students report sexual harassment without letting their harasser know. If your school has this option, you can use it to ask for **supportive measures** without starting an investigation against your harasser. You can say:

**“I was / I am being sexually harassed, and I don’t feel safe in school / I’m having trouble with schoolwork. I’m making a confidential report because I don’t want a Title IX investigation. Can you help me get supportive measures or accommodations under Title IX?”**

#### **But keep in mind:**

- Your school may have to investigate certain types of reports (like sexual abuse by a teacher), even if you ask them not to.
- Many adults at your school are **“mandatory reporters.”** This means they must report any **sexual assault** of a student to the police.

### OPTION 3: FILE A FORMAL COMPLAINT

Every school district should have a way to report sexual harassment or other violations of school rules, such as an online complaint form. You can fill out this complaint form to ask for a **school investigation**. You can also say to a trusted adult at school:

**“I was / I am being sexually harassed, and now I don’t feel safe in school / I’m having trouble with schoolwork. Can you help me file a Title IX complaint? I would like a Title IX investigation.”**

Your school district should have a policy or “complaint procedure” that explains how your school responds to complaints of sexual harassment. You might be able to find this policy on your school district’s website on a page called “Policies,” “Board Policies,” or “School Board Policies.” If you can’t find it on the website, ask your school for it. Read this policy so you know what to expect during your investigation.



# THE 100 SCHOOL DISTRICTS RECOMMENDATIONS

The **100 School Districts** report has 12 recommendations for school districts to prevent and respond to sexual harassment. The following pages are a summary of the 12 recommendations. Read the full report at [nwlc.org/100schooldistricts](https://nwlc.org/100schooldistricts) to learn more!



# WHAT CAN MY SCHOOL DO TO PREVENT SEXUAL HARASSMENT?



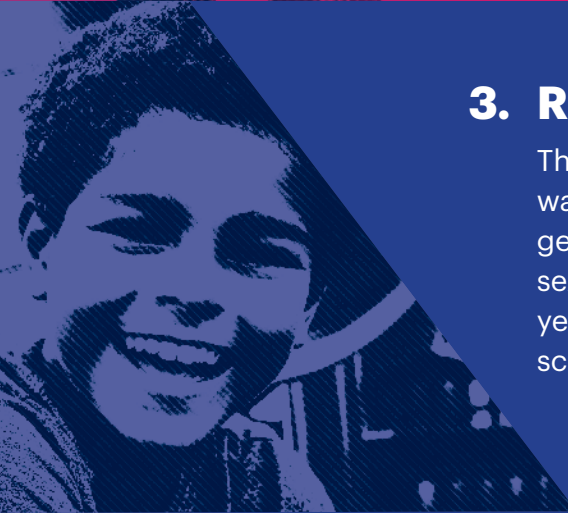
## 1. PROVIDE SEX EDUCATION FOR ALL K-12 STUDENTS.

Research shows students who receive effective sex education are less likely to become a sexual harasser or a sexual harassment victim. Your school district can help prevent sexual harassment by giving all K-12 students age-appropriate sex education. The **lessons** should cover topics like consent, sexual harassment, healthy dating relationships, bystander intervention, reproductive health, and LGBTQ identity. For example, schools should tell students: "Watch your comments and touches. Always ask for consent. Stop your behavior if someone asks you to stop, looks uncomfortable, or can't respond. The number one cause of sexual harassment is the harasser, so you must be responsible for your own behavior."



## 2. TRAIN ALL STAFF ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT.

Your teachers, counselors, principals, and other school staff should know how to recognize sexual harassment, including signs of child sexual abuse. They should also know about civil rights laws, like Title IX. School staff should also be trained on how to reach out to the Title IX coordinator and how to help students who report sexual harassment instead of ignoring them or victim-blaming them.



## 3. REMOVE POLICE FROM SCHOOLS.

The truth is that police don't make schools safer. Some students don't want to report sexual harassment to their school if they think the police will get involved. And school police officers sometimes physically assault and sexually assault students, especially girls and students of color. In recent years, **many school districts** have decided to get rid of school police. Your school district can too!



## 4. INVEST IN NON-POLICE ADULT HELPERS.

Millions of students go to schools with police... but **no counselors**, nurses, psychologists, or social workers! Your school district can prevent sexual harassment by removing school police and investing in non-police staff. Non-police staff can help students build healthy relationships with each other and respond more effectively to sexual harassment.



## 5. ABOLISH DRESS CODES.

Dress codes promote unfair stereotypes about gender, race, and size that can encourage sexual harassment. When schools punish girls for dress code violations, they teach students that girls are at fault when boys are “distracted” by what girls wear or when boys harass girls. Schools often apply dress codes unfairly against girls, students of color, LGBTQ students, and curvier students. Your school district should just **get rid of its dress code!** (If they really want to keep it, they should at least make it apply the same to all students regardless of their gender.)



## 6. RESPECT TRANSGENDER AND NONBINARY STUDENTS.

Research shows that trans and nonbinary students are more likely to be sexually assaulted when they aren’t allowed to be in single-sex spaces that match their gender identity. Your school district can help prevent sexual assault of trans and nonbinary students by allowing all students to use restrooms and locker rooms and **play on sports teams** that match their gender identity. Your school district should also **respect** the gender identity of trans and nonbinary students, which includes their names and pronouns (e.g., they, she, he). These policies can help prevent sexual harassment and make school safer and more inclusive for all students.



## 7. COLLECT CLIMATE SURVEY DATA.

A “climate survey” is an anonymous survey that asks students about how safe and supported they feel at school. Your school district should ask you and your classmates to fill out a **climate survey** about sexual harassment every one to two years. And it should share the results of the survey with all students and families, without sharing names or any identifying information. That way, you can learn how many students have been sexually harassed and figure out what policies you need to create a safer school.

# WHAT CAN MY SCHOOL DO TO RESPOND TO SEXUAL HARASSMENT?

## 8. MAKE IT EASY TO REPORT SEXUAL HARASSMENT.

Your school district's sexual harassment policies should be easy for you and your classmates—including English learners and students with disabilities—to **understand and find online**. Each school in your school district should have at least one adult called the "Title IX coordinator" to whom you can report sexual harassment (see "Know Your Rights" on page 4). But you should be able to make reports to other adults at school whom you trust as well. Students should also be able to make **anonymous** reports, without telling the school who you are. And students should be able to make **confidential** reports to someone who is not a "mandatory reporter," so that the school can help you without telling your harasser, starting a school investigation, or involving the police. Your school district should make sure that students and families know about all of these different reporting options.

## 9. SUPPORT STUDENTS WHO REPORT SEXUAL HARASSMENT.

Sexual harassment can cause anxiety, depression, or other mental health effects. This can make it harder for students to study, keep up their grades, stay in school clubs, or even go to school. If a student doesn't feel safe at school because of sexual harassment, their school should make a safety plan to keep the harasser away from the victim during classes, in the hallways, during lunch, in school activities, and on the way to/from school. If a student is having trouble learning because of sexual harassment, their school should offer free counseling, tutoring, excused absences, extra time for homework or tests, and/or a chance to redo homework or retake a test.

## 10. DON'T PUNISH STUDENTS WHO REPORT SEXUAL HARASSMENT.

Too often, schools punish students who report sexual harassment instead of protecting them. For example, many survivors are suspended by their schools because their school thinks a sexual assault was consensual or because the survivor previously had consensual sex with their assailant. Other survivors are suspended for being drunk or violating a COVID rule during their assault, for fighting back against a harasser, or for just talking about what happened. And many students who ask their schools for help are forced to transfer to another school away from their friends and teachers. Students are less likely to ask for help for sexual harassment if they're afraid they'll be punished. Your school district should have policies that make sure students who report sexual harassment are not punished!



## **11. CONDUCT FAIR AND TIMELY INVESTIGATIONS.**

Your school district should investigate all reports of sexual harassment right away. The victim should have the same rights as the reported harasser to participate in the investigation, and students shouldn't be blamed or doubted just because they don't look or act the way the school district expects a victim to look or act. At the end of each investigation, your school district should tell both sides about its decision and should also tell the victim what it will do to keep them safe.



## **12. OFFER A RESTORATIVE PROCESS AS AN OPTION.**

In a restorative process, the harasser starts by admitting that they harmed the victim. As the harasser and victim make a plan for the harasser to repair the harm, the victim's needs and goals are centered. The victim and harasser can choose to be in separate rooms or the same room and can also choose to invite family or friends into the restorative process. This is different from an investigation, where the school looks at the evidence to decide if it should discipline the harasser. Research shows that when they're done right, restorative processes can make victims of sexual harm feel safe and respected, and can be better than investigations at helping sexual harassers learn what they did wrong. Your school district should offer a restorative process as an option in sexual harassment cases as long as both sides agree to the process and understand what they are agreeing to, either side can choose to switch back to an investigation at any time, and the school has a well-trained facilitator. No one should ever be forced to participate in a restorative process.



# HOW TO CHANGE YOUR SCHOOL'S POLICIES

You can urge your school district to be one of the “100 Schools Districts” that is a leader in establishing strong protections for students against sexual harassment! Here’s how:

## 1. BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER.

There is strength in numbers! Your school district is more likely to change its sexual harassment policies if there are many of you demanding change. Here are some ways to bring people together:

- **Make (or join) a student group.** You can send emails, make classroom (or Zoom) announcements, and post on social media to find other students who want to change your school district's sexual harassment policies. You can start a new student club (like **Students Against Sexual Harassment**) or join an existing club (like a Feminism Club or Gay Straight Alliance Club). Remember: your group doesn't have to be an "official" club. The important thing is that you make a group so that students to work together!
- **Find adults who can help.** Talk to adults you trust at school, like a teacher, counselor, club advisor, coach, or assistant principal. You can also talk to adults in your school's parent-teacher association (PTA). Having adults on your side will make it easier to push for changes.
- **Make your group diverse.** Make sure you reach out to all types of students—including LGBTQ students, students of color, students with disabilities, athletes, mathletes, musicians, class officers, and more. If you can, invite students from other schools in your school district to join you. The more diverse your group is, the stronger you are together.

## 2. MAKE A LIST OF DEMANDS.

Once you have brought together a group of students and/or adults, you need to make a list of "demands." A demand is a specific policy change you want a decisionmaker, like a school district, to make.

First, ask everyone in your group to read the *100 School Districts* report at [nwlc.org/100schooldistricts](http://nwlc.org/100schooldistricts). You can also find a summary of the report on pages 6-10 of this toolkit.

Then, compare your school district's current policies to the 12 recommendations in the *100 School Districts* report. What is your school district already doing? What are they not doing yet? Is there a *100 School District* recommendation that your group is especially excited about? Make a list of things you want your school district to do: this is your list of demands.

### 3. REACH OUT TO SCHOOL LEADERS.

Once you have made a list of demands, reach out to your school district leaders. You can start by asking your superintendent, school board members, principal, and/or Title IX coordinator for a meeting about sexual harassment.

Before the meeting, you can make presentation slides that explain how sexual harassment affects you and your classmates, what policy changes the school district should make, and why you think these changes are important and necessary. You may want to bring copies of the *100 School Districts* report to the meeting, or share the link ahead of time ([nwlc.org/100schooldistricts](https://nwlc.org/100schooldistricts)).

During the meeting, be sure to take notes. And remember, you don't have to agree to anything during the meeting—bring any questions back to the group, so that you can make decisions together.



### 4. ADD PRESSURE IF NEEDED.

What if your school district doesn't want to make any policy changes? Changing any policy usually takes time, so don't be discouraged if you don't get results right away. Here are some tips on how to follow up or "escalate":

- **Write a petition or sign-on letter.** You can write a petition or letter to your superintendent, school board members, Title IX coordinator, and school principals. The letter should explain how sexual harassment affects you and your classmates and what policy changes the school district should make. Include a link to the *100 School Districts* report ([nwlc.org/100schooldistricts](https://nwlc.org/100schooldistricts)) with your letter. Ask as many students, teachers, and family members as possible to sign the letter—the more, the better!
- **Speak at a school board meeting.** Most school boards have a public meeting about once a month. Find out when your school board meets by going to their website. You might have to sign up ahead of time in order to speak at the meeting. Before the meeting, write down what you want to say and check to see if you have a time limit. Be sure to explain how sexual harassment affects you and your classmates, what policy changes the school district should make, and why those changes are important and necessary. Then, bring as many students, teachers, and family members as you can to the meeting—the more, the better! If it's an in-person meeting, you can ask everyone to wear the same color. If it's a Zoom meeting, everyone can change their picture to the same background. If you have a printer, bring copies of the *100 School Districts* report ([nwlc.org/100schooldistricts](https://nwlc.org/100schooldistricts)) to share with your school board members.



- **Go to the media.** You can make your demands more public by writing an op-ed in your school newspaper or local newspaper. You can also ask a local reporter to write a story about your group. If you talk to a reporter, be sure to think about the main points you want to make ahead of time. Write down a few simple talking points to help you stay on message. Remember, you don't have to answer every question, and you don't have to share anything about your personal experience with sexual harassment if you don't want to.

- **Protest at school.** If you're on campus, you can organize a rally, ask everyone to wear the same color or make T-shirts with the same slogan, make signs or posters, put on an art project or performance, or plan a sit-in or walkout. If your classes are online, you can ask everyone to change their Zoom background or plan a "Zoom-out." Keep in mind that public school students have some free speech rights under the First Amendment. For example, courts have said that students can't be punished for wearing things like message T-shirts or armbands to protest at school. But you can be punished for other types of protests if your school thinks you're being too **"disruptive."** And some students—like Black and brown students, LGBTQ students, and students with disabilities—are more likely than others to be suspended or expelled, even if you're all doing the exact same thing. So, before you protest, especially if you plan to take more "disruptive" steps like staging a sit-in or a walk-out or otherwise breaking school rules, make sure everyone in your group is aware of what risks they're taking, so they can decide whether they want to be involved. You may want to check your school policies to see how much trouble you and your classmates could get in, but keep in mind that it's impossible to predict ahead of time exactly how your school will respond to your protest.

- Get more protest ideas from the National Youth Rights Association, Advocates for Youth, and Know Your IX.

## 5. TELL US HOW IT WENT!

Did you change any of your school district's policies? Does your school district want to be featured as one of the "100 School Districts" that has strong protections for students against sexual harassment? If yes, let us know at [nwlc.org/100schooldistricts](https://nwlc.org/100schooldistricts) so we can celebrate with you!

And if you need more help, please reach out too! We are here to support you as you fight to make your school safer. And along the way, make sure you take time to celebrate every small win!



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**A better world is possible.**



To learn more, please contact National Women's Law Center and Girls for Gender Equity at [info@nwlc.org](mailto:info@nwlc.org) and [media@ggenyc.org](mailto:media@ggenyc.org).

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