

What Would a Successful, Safe, and Healthy School Look Like for Girls?

To be successful, safe, and healthy for all students, schools must create an environment conducive to learning, where students at risk – including girls – receive the help they need to prepare for college and careers. Yet the voices of girls at risk in school have been largely absent from the debate around education reform, and many policymakers and the media have relied on the overgeneralization that all girls are succeeding in school.

In fact, the available statistics show that many girls – especially girls of color – are left behind, facing huge barriers to graduation. And girls who drop out of high school are more likely than their male counterparts to be unemployed, to earn low wages if they do get jobs, and to have to rely on public support programs to get by and take care of their families.¹

To be successful, safe, and healthy, schools must identify at-risk students early and address the non-academic barriers to learning they face. At a minimum, such schools would do the following:

1. Address the Needs of Girls At Risk, Including Pregnant and Parenting Students

For many girls at risk, such as pregnant and parenting students, the barriers to succeeding in school are enormous. In a survey of dropouts across the country, nearly one-half of the females surveyed said that becoming a parent played a role in their decisions to leave school; 33 percent of female dropouts said it was a major factor.² Many pregnant and parenting teens are pushed out of their schools, in both blatant and subtle ways, in violation of Title IX. A successful school for pregnant and parenting students is one that protects pregnant and parenting students from being pushed out and discriminated against, offers them inclusive, appropriate and academically-rigorous interventions and other supports, and helps them secure child care and transportation.

2. Foster Girls' Athletics Opportunities

Not only is ensuring equal opportunities for girls in athletics required by civil rights law, it's also smart educational policy, as female athletics participation is correlated with better educational, employment and health outcomes for women. Studies have shown that girls who participate in sports are more engaged in school and less likely to get pregnant, drop out, use drugs, smoke, or develop mental illness.³ Also, increasing children's physical activity can lower obesity risks even into adulthood.⁴ Currently, girls comprise 49 percent of the high school student population⁵ but receive only 41 percent of all athletic participation opportunities, a total of 1.3 million fewer opportunities than male high school athletes have.⁶ Narrowing this gap – in part by requiring high schools to publicly report their athletics participation and expenditures broken down by race and gender – is essential to create successful, healthy schools where girls can thrive.

3. Protect Girls from Harassment and Bullying

To effectively improve graduation rates and student success, schools must provide all students with a positive and safe environment that is conducive to learning. Feeling unsafe at school has been correlated with declining academic performance, skipping school, and dropping out.⁷ Schools should swiftly address bullying and harassment that is severe, persistent, or pervasive, and create a positive and safe school climate. Moreover, schools should adopt policies and procedures that protect all students from bullying and harassment, including not only gender-based harassment, such as that based on pregnant or parenting status, but also harassment based on sexual orientation and perceived gender identity.

4. Use Positive, Evidence-Based Approaches to Discipline Applied Equally to All

School disciplinary rates are now the highest they have been in our nation's history. Moreover, exclusionary discipline practices are used disproportionately against boys and girls of color and students with disabilities. Some girls are especially at risk for unfair discipline. In fact, a recent study of disciplinary practices at middle schools in the 2006-2007 school year found that while Black males were the group most likely to be suspended from school, suspension rates for Black females were the second highest, and were higher than those of Hispanic or White males.⁸ Black females also had the highest percentage point *growth* in suspension rates from 2002 to 2006, higher than for Black males or for Hispanic and White females.⁹ Many of these girls are punished disproportionately for very minor infractions. For example, in Alabama, a high school student was sent to an alternative school for "drug use" after taking Motrin to relieve menstrual cramps. In New York, a middle school student was arrested for writing "okay" on her desk. Schools should reform their disciplinary practices to eliminate harmful, exclusionary, and unfairly punitive practices, instead focusing on positive, evidence-based approaches (such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports) that facilitate the creation of a successful, safe and healthy learning environment.

5. Provide Comprehensive, Medically Accurate, Age-Appropriate Sex Education

Since pregnant and parenting students often face enormous barriers to graduation and post-secondary success, health education – including comprehensive, medically accurate and age-appropriate sex education including information on the prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections – is a school's first-line defense against dropout for its female students. Providing students with the tools they need to make responsible decisions about their health is a critical component of keeping students on track and ensuring college and career readiness for all.

6. Ensure Transparency to Engage Parents and Other Community Members

The stereotype that all girls are doing just fine is persistent and harmful, perpetuated in part by the lack of publicly-available data on the performance in school of subgroups of girls. Data on the indicators of successful, safe and healthy schools – such as disciplinary practices, bullying and harassment, athletics participation and expenditures, and pregnancy and parenting – must be made public, and to be meaningful, that data must be fully disaggregated and cross-tabulated by gender and disability. This will enable parents and community members to access information they need for local, community-based efforts to improve learning conditions for vulnerable girls.

¹ NATIONAL WOMEN'S LAW CENTER. WHEN GIRLS DON'T GRADUATE WE ALL FAIL: A CALL TO IMPROVE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES FOR GIRLS, October 2007, *available at*

http://www.nwlc.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/when_girls_dont_graduate.pdf.

² Elizabeth Stearns & Elizabeth Glennie, *When and Why Dropouts Leave High School*, 38 YOUTH & SOC'Y 41-42 (2006).

³ *As Girls Become Women, Sports Pay Dividends*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 16, 2010, *available at*

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/16/health/16well.html>; WOMEN'S SPORTS FOUNDATION, WOMEN'S SPORTS & PHYSICAL ACTIVITY FACTS & STATISTICS (2007), *available at*

http://www.womenssportsfoundation.org/binary-data/WSF_ARTICLE/pdf_file/191.pdf.

⁴ Tara Parker-Pope, *As Girls Become Women, Sports Pay Dividends*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 16, 2010, *available at*

<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/16/health/16well.html>.

⁵ U.S. CENSUS BUREAU, CURRENT POPULATION SURVEY, SCHOOL ENROLLMENT, TABLE 1 (2005), *available at*

<http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/school/cps2005/tab01-01.xls>.

⁶ NATIONAL FEDERATION OF STATE HIGH SCHOOL ASSOCIATIONS, 2007-2008 HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS PARTICIPATION SURVEY, *available at* <http://www.nfhs.org/WorkArea/linkit.aspx?LinkIdentifier=id&ItemID=4296>.

⁷ AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY WOMEN EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION, HOSTILE HALLWAYS: BULLYING, TEASING, AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT SCHOOL 36-38 (2001), *available at*

<http://www.aauw.org/research/hostile.cfm>.

⁸ DANIEL J. LOSEN & RUSSELL J. SKIBA, S. POVERTY LAW CTR., SUSPENDED EDUCATION: URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOLS IN CRISIS 5-7 (2010), *available at* [http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-](http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/school-discipline/suspended-education-urban-middle-schools-in-crisis/Suspended-Education_FINAL-2.pdf)

[12-education/school-discipline/suspended-education-urban-middle-schools-in-crisis/Suspended-Education_FINAL-2.pdf](http://civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/school-discipline/suspended-education-urban-middle-schools-in-crisis/Suspended-Education_FINAL-2.pdf).

⁹ *Id.* at 7-8.