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Safe Schools: How to Prevent Peer-to-Peer Sexual Misconduct in K-12 Schools

Executive Summary

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SSAIS

INTRODUCTION

In schools across the country, a deeply concerning issue persists and negatively affects the lives of countless young people: peer-to-peer sexual harassment and assault. A student's educational journey is meant to empower and uplift, but the shadow of sexual misconduct haunts many, disrupting the educational foundation they need to be emotionally and academically successful. Every child deserves the right to learn in an environment free from harassment, violence, and fear.

Because public schools receive federal funding, they carry the heavy responsibility of upholding Title IX's mandate to prevent, promptly investigate, and properly remedy acts of sexual misconduct (Grant et al., 2023).

Title IX Coordinators and school administrators are critical in creating a sustainable change that reduces sexual harassment and assault among students in school. The problem lies in a lack of research surrounding administrators' experiences in preventing and investigating allegations of sexual misconduct.

We are Team TALKS (Teaching Allies Legal Knowledge with SSAIS), and our goal is to provide SSAIS with meaningful findings and recommendations that will aid the organization in fulfilling its mission of ensuring all K-12 students are provided their right to an equal education free of sexual harassment and sexual assault. Using qualitative and quantitative research designs, we sought honest and vulnerable feedback from school administrators and Title IX Coordinators regarding addressing and preventing sexual misconduct, professional learning experiences, and the impact of clubs and organizations in their school building.

A deeper understanding of sexual misconduct in our schools will better inform decision-making and create safer school experiences for our youth.
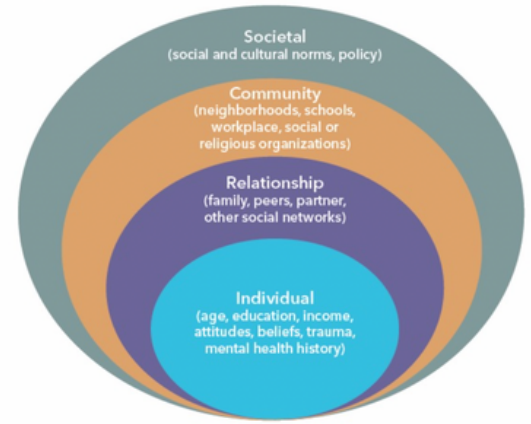
LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this research focused on four strands: sexual misconduct reporting data and prevention efforts in K-12 schools, the development of an effective needs assessment, the creation of quality content and implementation of impactful professional learning for school staff, and growing the influence of school clubs and organizations. The information garnered through the researcher's synthesis led to an understanding of trends, gaps, or areas of need that research should address.

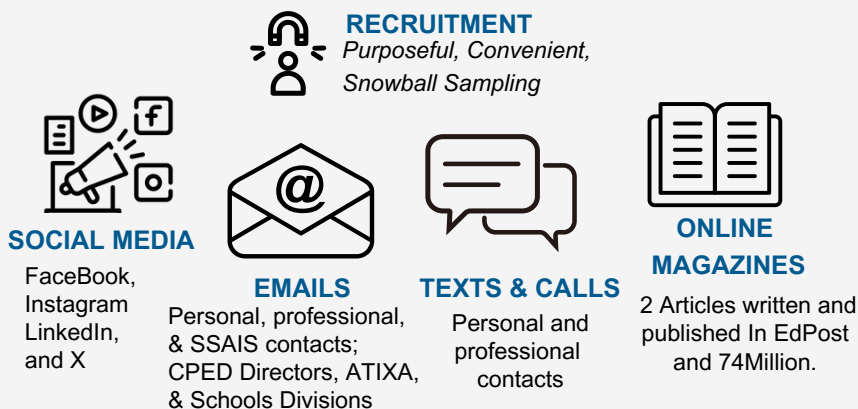| TOPIC	KEY POINTS	GAPS IN RESEARCH
School Safety	• School climate created by school administrators • Actual occurrences versus reported occurances • Barriers for reporting	• Experiences of School Administrators and Title IX Coordinators regarding processing sexual misconduct • Effective Prevention Programs Implemented in K-12 Schools
Needs Assessments	• Gap between the current and desired state • Stakeholder input • Action plan	
Professional Learning Best Practices	• Adults make sense of learning • Knight's Partnership Practices • Guskey's Levels of PD Evaluation	• Professional Learning Practices specific to Sexual Misconduct in K-12 Schools
Growing a Non-Profit's Influence	• Model Organization • Increasing non-profit impact • Expanding SASH Clubs	• Strategies for Successfully Growing and Sustaining K-12, especially those experiencing sexual misconduct

METHODS

Theoretical Framework

Schools do not act in isolation. Through the lens of the Social-Ecological Framework, the researcher's work seeks to determine changes that must be made at various levels to reduce peer-to-peer sexual misconduct in schools. To create a climate shift within the school, leaders must first understand the individual students they are supporting.
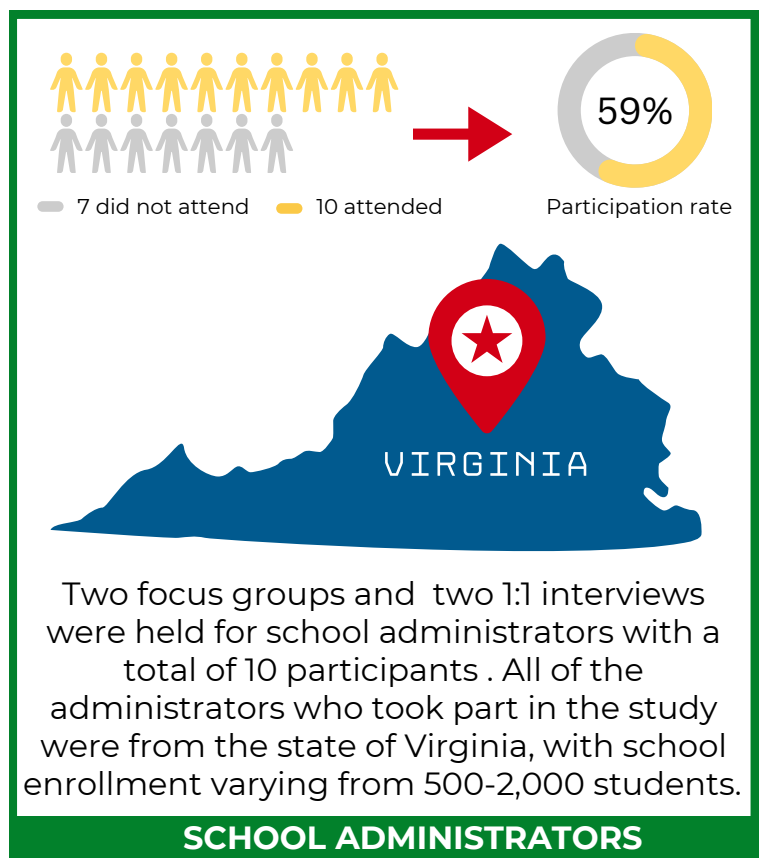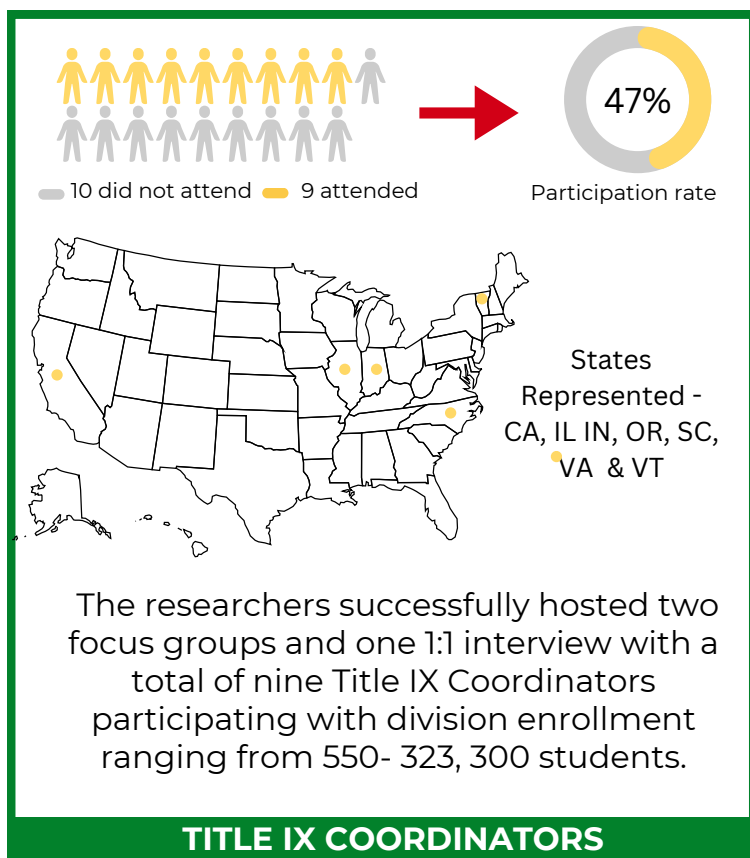

Socio-Ecological Model for Driver Safety

Methodology

RECRUITMENT
Purposeful, Convenient, Snowball Sampling

SOCIAL MEDIA
FaceBook, Instagram LinkedIn, and X

EMAILS
Personal, professional, & SSAIS contacts; CPED Directors, ATIXA, & Schools Divisions

TEXTS & CALLS
Personal and professional contacts

ONLINE MAGAZINES
2 Articles written and published In EdPost and 74Million.

The researchers solicited participation from K-12 school administrators and Title IX Coordinators across the United States and all school levels (elementary, middle, and high). The invitations were disseminated to participants through a variety of efforts.

Recruitment Outcomes

47% Participation rate

10 did not attend   9 attended

States Represented - CA, IL IN, OR, SC, VA & VT

The researchers successfully hosted two focus groups and one 1:1 interview with a total of nine Title IX Coordinators participating with division enrollment ranging from 550- 323, 300 students.

TITLE IX COORDINATORS

59% Participation rate

7 did not attend   10 attended

VIRGINIA

Two focus groups and two 1:1 interviews were held for school administrators with a total of 10 participants . All of the administrators who took part in the study were from the state of Virginia, with school enrollment varying from 500-2,000 students.

SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

METHODS

The data collection section of the methodology included both a qualitative and quantitative phase.

Within the qualitative phase, the researchers conducted focus groups that provided context and the best rich and descriptive data about the experiences and needs of Title IX Coordinators and school administrators that a survey alone could not. Following a semi-structured protocol, we conducted homogeneous focus groups for 75 minutes each. The focus group protocol was intentionally aligned with the six research questions, both Title IX Coordinators and administrators received questions specific to their job, however, many questions contained common themes allowing for some questions to be similar or the same. Similar or identical questions allowed for comparisons in findings across both roles.

Within the quantitative phase the researchers embedded a Nearpod lesson, an interactive self-paced platform, where demographic data was collected through a variety of methods such as Likert scale, yes/no, and numerical responses throughout the focus group. This method encouraged all participants to engage throughout our time together and allowed the completed questions to be viewed in real-time, which in some cases, spawned additional discussion.

Data Collection

QUALITATITVE PHASE
Focus Groups
Homogeneous
Semi-Structured
75 minutes

QUANTITATITVE PHASE
Embedded in focus group using Nearpod. Variety of questions- likert, yes/no, numbers

Limitations

All administrators from VA
The researchers attempted to find literature to support the idea of administrators' experiences being relatively the same across the nation but did not find any relevant studies in our search.

Semi-structured protocol
Created variations In questions and order of questions based on the level of participation and engagement.

Sample size
The researchers acknowledge that this small population may leave certain demographics unrepresented.

Missed Opportunity
The researchers did not ask interested participants how they gained access to the study, which could have allowed us to increase the methods in those areas and gain more participants.
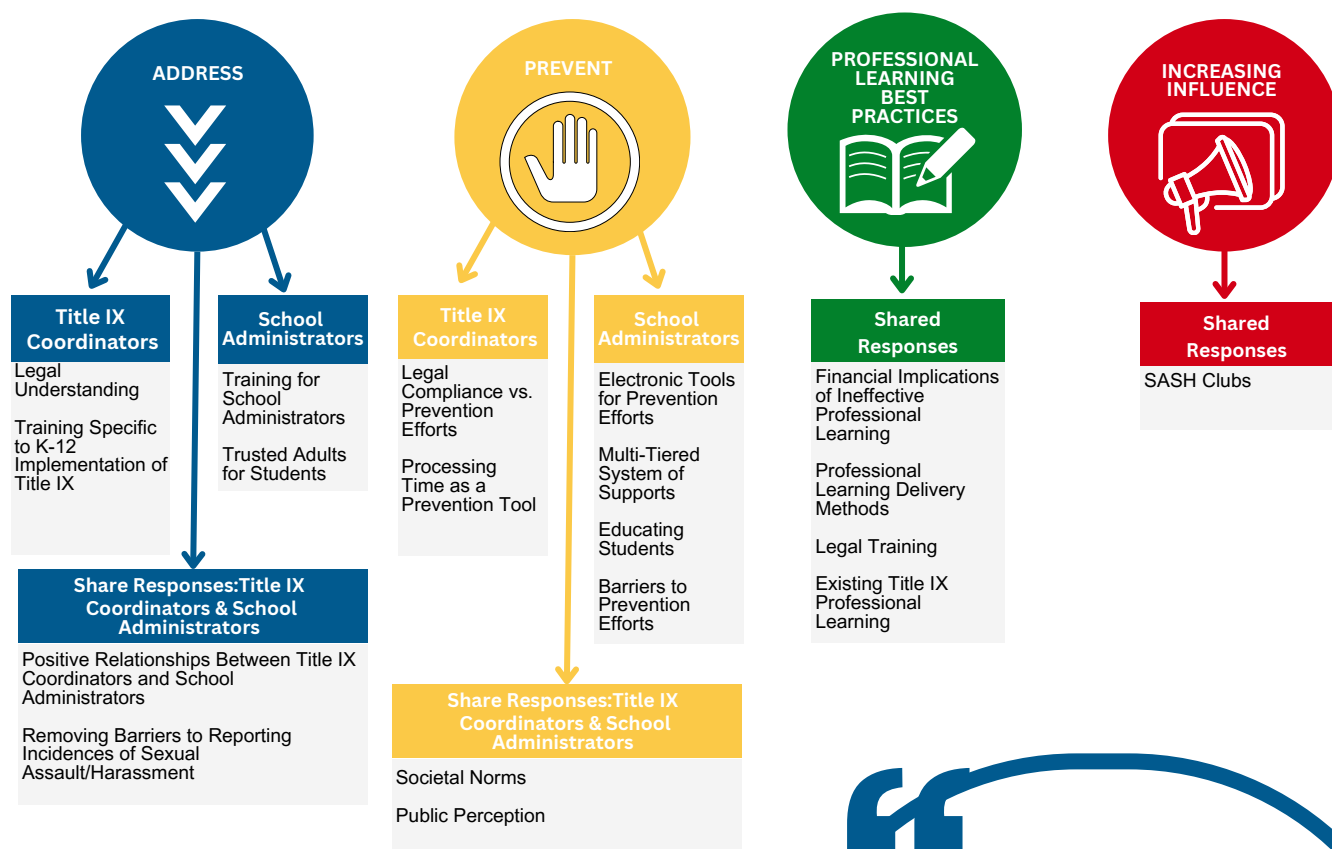
Employment Verification
The researchers opened their study to scammers seeking an honorarium.

Nearpod Technology Issues
With two facilitators, the researchers were able to help navigate these situations individually with focus group members to minimize disruption.

FINDINGS

The findings from our focus groups and supplemental quantitative data collections provide essential insights into the experiences and preferences of K-12 school administrators and Title IX Coordinators. We sought honest and vulnerable feedback from Title IX Coordinators and school administrators reflecting their individual and school-wide successes, areas of growth, and concerns about Title IX implementation in K-12 school settings. The graphic below provides a visual representation of our findings. We highlight direct quotes from our participants to ensure their voices are amplified and to provide evidence and context of our analysis.

ADDRESS

Title IX Coordinators

Legal Understanding

Training Specific to K-12 Implementation of Title IX

School Administrators

Training for School Administrators

Trusted Adults for Students

Share Responses:Title IX Coordinators & School Administrators

Positive Relationships Between Title IX Coordinators and School Administrators

Removing Barriers to Reporting Incidences of Sexual Assault/Harassment

PREVENT

Title IX Coordinators

Legal Compliance vs. Prevention Efforts

Processing Time as a Prevention Tool

School Administrators

Electronic Tools for Prevention Efforts

Multi-Tiered System of Supports

Educating Students

Barriers to Prevention Efforts

Share Responses:Title IX Coordinators & School Administrators

Societal Norms

Public Perception

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING BEST PRACTICES

Shared Responses

Financial Implications of Ineffective Professional Learning

Professional Learning Delivery Methods

Legal Training

Existing Title IX Professional Learning

INCREASING INFLUENCE

Shared Responses

SASH Clubs

> *I don't think common sense always prevails. But there's laws, and its not for me to dictate what's right or wrong. So, I have to do it, yes.*
>
> ***It's always about kids, it should always be about kids,*** *but at the same time, we have to make sure we're following procedure to ensure that our division is covered.*
>
> *-Title IX Coordinator*

FINDINGS

> **"**
> *It's [Title IX] a mini judicial process*
> *-Title IX Coordinator*
> **"**

ADDRESS
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Title IX Coordinators

1) Need better legal understanding to ensure they are complying with all components of Title IX regulations

2) Help in understanding how changes to Title IX regulations impact schools, students, and staff would be beneficial.

3) Requested more training specific to K-12 implementation of Title IX.

School Administrators

1) Desire more training specific to peer-to-peer sexual misconduct. Participants requested training be more specific to the needs of youth, families, and school discipline policies.

2) Trusted adults for students is necessary for addressing misconduct. When students have access to an adult they trust, their willingness to share increases and the school is provided an opportunity to investigate and address sexual misconduct.

Shared Responses

1) Positive relationships between Title IX Coordinators and administrators are imperative for student safety

- Title IX Coordinators said they use high levels of visibility, prompt responsiveness, and judgement-free coaching as means of connecting with school administrators.

2) Need to remove barriers for reporting Incidences of sexual misconduct.

- Students do not report sexual misconduct because they believe the school's response will not help them.

- If students fear their families will be disappointed, angry, or negatively impacted by their victimization, they may not report.

> **"**
> *"I don't think there can ever be enough training with this [processing sexual harassment and/or assault]."*
> *-School Administrator*
> **"**

FINDINGS

> [It's] my responsibility to keep the district compliant with Title IX. It's not necessarily to solve every problem or prevent every possible occurrence.
>
> -Title IX Coordinator

Title IX Coordinators

1) Some Title IX Coordinators do not view prevention of sexual misconduct as a primary job responsibility, rather their role is to ensure the school complies with Title IX regulations

2) Confidentiality regulations may hinder the victims and their caretakers' confidence and trust in the school's actions

3) Processing time can be a prevention tool - When acts of sexual misconduct are assigned consequences, students note that the school will not tolerate such infractions, and this may stop others from acting in a similar capacity.

School Administrators

1) Electronic Tools for Prevention Efforts - anonymous alert systems and computer monitoring programs detract from negative behaviors

2) Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports - student led initiatives teach appropriate behaviors

3) Explicit instruction about appropriate behaviors is a strong means of changing student behavior

4) Barriers to prevention efforts include:
- Focus on academic achievement, especially in at-risk schools leaves little to no time for prioritizing preventing sexual misconduct
- Fear that in today's divisive climate, increased talk, lessons, and activities tailored to sexual misconduct may make the community uncomfortable. If families perceive the school as unsafe or that it is teaching students about behaviors and skills that should be family-based, there are far-reaching repercussions.

Shared Responses

1) Prevention efforts fall flat when the messages students receive from family and society do not align with the expectations and lessons implemented inside the school.

2) Community views of sexual misconduct are problematic because the 'boys will be boys' mentality pervades and students may be made to feel like they are overreacting if they report sexual misconduct.

FINDINGS

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING BEST PRACTICES

> " I think I'm very scenario-based. Like, I want the PowerPoint. I want the notes. I want the knowledge, right? But then I want to, I want to do it?... I want to practice. I want to do case studies. I want those sorts of situations.
>
> -School Administrator "

Shared Responses

1) If Title IX Coordinators and school administrators are not provided effective professional learning, they are more likely to mishandle a Title IX claim. Consequences for Title IX violations can include significant financial implications.

2) Calls for in-person, collaborative, and scenario-based opportunities for learning are requested. Time for collaboration and discussion of real-life scenarios is a preferred method of learning

3) Participants requested professional learning focus on the legal components of Title IX.

4) Existing Title IX professional learning does not cater to K-12 schools, and participants indicated a need for information to be specific to K-12 students, staff, and families.

Shared Responses

1) To grow its' influence, a non-profit organization should focus on partnering with specific schools and/or divisions. It can build partnerships by first contacting staff at the district level and expressing its interest in a partnership.

- Our team learned that an important way to reinforce partnering, is when the work is also aligned to the divisions goals and strategic plan.
- Participants indicated going online to review information is too time-consuming. and they want to partner with someone who can come in and build or support a program.

2) Focus group participants felt creating a club focused on sexual harassment and assault would be difficult because of how it could be perceived by the community.

- Attention to prevention was more palatable than a club to support students who have been traumatized by a sexual event.
- An alternative, might be student-initiated clubs focused on building school community and climate, focus on kindness and positive-behavior systems, or developing respect amongst the student body.
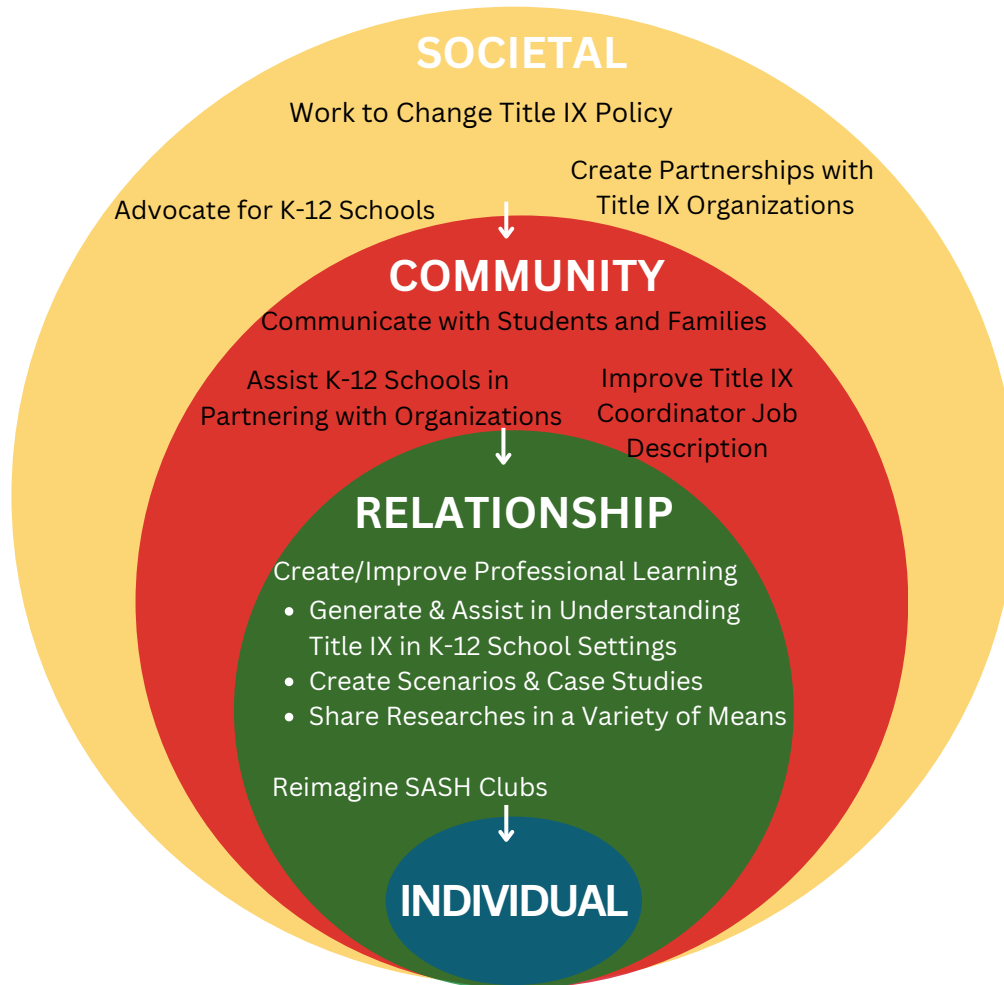
INCREASING INFLUENCE

> " The non-profit community organizations that I wanted to partner with, I could show where they would tie to 2 or 3 of our district strategic priorities. And you know, that's kind of how you talk in K-12. Does it align with what the district says they wanna do?-
>
> -Title IX Coordinator "

RECOMMENDATIONS

SOCIETAL

Work to Change Title IX Policy

Create Partnerships with
Title IX Organizations

Advocate for K-12 Schools

COMMUNITY

Communicate with Students and Families

Assist K-12 Schools in
Partnering with Organizations

Improve Title IX
Coordinator Job
Description

RELATIONSHIP

Create/Improve Professional Learning
- Generate & Assist in Understanding
  Title IX in K-12 School Settings
- Create Scenarios & Case Studies
- Share Researches in a Variety of Means

Reimagine SASH Clubs

INDIVIDUAL

This study was grounded in the Social-Ecological Framework which examines how the relationship between an individual and their peers, community, and/or society can impact their psyche and overall development (Guy-Evans, 2023). Recommendations were presented in the spheres encompassed within the framework and are not listed in order of priority, value, or timeline for completion, but rather, what can be done in each sphere. Arrows pointing downward depict that each broader sphere impacts the next, with the hope that there will ultimately be a change on an individual level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Societal

SSAIS can advocate for K-12 schools by working to change Title IX regulations. Current requirements are difficult to implement and challenging for students and families to understand. SSAIS's focus on protecting students in K-12 public schools and its expansive library of resources make the organization a great candidate for advocating for change. Advocating can be done by meeting with civic leaders, legislators, lawmakers, or state departments of education or by presenting at professional conferences.

We recommend SSAIS build strong partnerships with other organizations. Per our literature review, non-profit organizations increase their impact when they partner with groups that share similar missions. We found Rainn, the National Center for Missing or Exploited Children, and the MidAtlantic Equity Consortium as possible partners for SSAIS. These organizations, and many others, focus on school safety, equity, and educating students about sexual harassment and assault exist and could serve as strong SSAIS collaborators.

Community

Title IX Coordinators are frequently balancing this role with other responsibilities and when educators wear multiple hats, colleagues, students, and families can be uncertain about their primary duties. **We recommend that SSAIS create sample Title IX Coordinator job descriptions for school divisions with the flexibility to adapt for their specific needs.** It's important to address specific language about working with families and community organizations to prioritize Title IX education outside the school walls and hopefully impact societal views.

With the release of new regulations, SSAIS can develop and share templates explaining the updates for Title IX. If SSAIS creates transparent messaging such as digital resources, short videos, flyers, or letters explaining the Title IX updates and their impact on K-12, educational leaders can use this information as a basis for communicating with their school community.

S**SAIS' ability to serve as a conduit between schools and organizations encouraging schools to build relationships with community partners can be beneficial.** Title IX Coordinators and school administrators shared a need for school divisions to partner with outside organizations to educate students, staff, families, and the greater school community about sexual misconduct. Although our school administrators could not share any current partnerships, they were not opposed to collaborative efforts to save time and money and strengthen helping relationships.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Relationship

We heard from our participants about the difficulty of supporting K-12 students and their families throughout the Title IX process. **With this in mind, we recommend that SSAIS create resources and training specific to peer-to-peer sexual misconduct in the K-12 public school setting.** If SSAIS creates teaching tools about how Title IX functions in a K-12 setting, this alleviates divisions having to make their own interpretations of the law. Beneficial materials may include discussion questions for leaders to work through with colleagues, videos that model how to respond to an allegation, and/or a parent communication that explains the Title IX process to families in a digestible, meaningful capacity

Our research participants overwhelmingly concurred that professional learning through case studies and scenarios is one of the most beneficial learning methods. **We suggest SSAIS create case studies and scenarios for school staff to work through.** The evidence-based practice of learning through scenarios was discussed 10 times in our Title IX Coordinator focus groups and over twenty times with school administrators. Considerable research supports the importance of real-world application as an effective component of effective professional development.
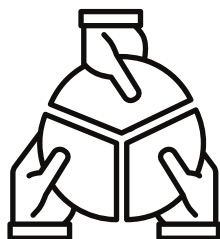
SSAIS has many resources that are not being accessed at their desired rate. **SSAIS could make its resources accessible by directly sharing them with the intended audiences. This sharing can be done through electronic communication, fostering partnerships with other organizations focused on school safety and mental health, setting up display tables with their resources, or presenting at in-person conferences.** Administrators recommended contacting several staff members when seeking partnership with a school, specifically referencing the benefit of including school counselors in the communication.

SSAIS currently utilizes SASH Clubs (students against sexual harassment) as a means for educating and empowering students. **However, our findings suggest incorporating sexual harassment and assault education into existing school curriculum provides an opportunity for students to make better connections between taught topics with sexual misconduct prevention and reporting methods.**

Student-led initiatives are a powerful means for creating change. **As opposed to a club which solely focuses on sexual harassment and assault, offering resources for discussion topics and activities to promote prevention and protection should be embedded within effective, established school clubs.** This also provides SSAIS with a wider audience of students.

MEET THE TEAM

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