

Guide

# Ten Things You Can Do When a Title IX Complaint Fails



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- Title IX, a federal civil rights law, prohibits all educational institutions that receive federal money from discriminating against students based on sex. Sexual harassment and assault can be forms of sex discrimination when they can create a hostile learning environment that limits or prevents a student from participating in and benefiting from a school's educational program.
- The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) is responsible for making sure schools follow Title IX. OCR tells schools what their responsibilities are under Title IX and investigates complaints against schools that fail to comply. When someone believes a school is not following Title IX, such as not investigating or otherwise not responding appropriately or effectively to reports of sexual harassment, they can file a complaint with OCR.
- Since March 2025, OCR has faced significant challenges in processing Title IX violation complaints after the closure of seven regional offices and the layoff of nearly half its staff. These changes are likely to hinder OCR from promptly investigating and resolving complaints about schools that mishandle reports of sexual harassment and assault. With fewer investigators, backlogs will likely worsen, and new complaints will face significant delays or go unaddressed altogether.
- Students, parents, and all stakeholders should therefore become familiar with state laws and school district policies and practices so they can take alternative steps to seek accountability and ensure the right to an education free from sex discrimination is protected. These steps can guide your response to the way your school handles sexual harassment and assault complaints.



**1. Research your school district policies.** School districts must develop policies on sexual harassment, non-discrimination, and reporting and investigating Title IX and other types of complaints, such as harassment, intimidation, and bullying, that are not covered by Title IX. Often this information is included in the district's website, the Student-Parent Handbook, and, for school staff, the Employee Handbook. Find out the name of the district official who is responsible for compliance with district policies, state laws, and Title IX. Look up your district Title IX Coordinator (sometimes called a Compliance Officer); their contact information must be readily available on the district website.

**2. Learn about the complaint process at your school district.** Schools must make the details and forms related to their complaint process widely available. They should explain who receives the complaint and how long it should take for a response, investigation, resolution, and notice/closure. Some schools or school districts may use a standard form for reporting incidents of sexual harassment, bullying, and intimidation. The complaint procedures should explain the ways you can appeal the school's process and decisions (see the SSAIS guide [Investigating What Happens When a Student Reports Sexual Harassment](#)).



**3. Work with a victim advocate.** A victim advocate provides support and assistance to people who have been harmed by crime or trauma. They can help individuals and families through the emotional and procedural difficulties of the [complaint process](#) and assist in arranging mandatory supportive measures, no-contact orders, and more. You can connect with a victim advocate through a local sexual assault response center. RAINN has a [tool](#) you can use to find a victim advocate near you. You can also contact your state sexual assault coalition using the [National Directory of Sexual Violence Coalitions](#).

**4. Learn about state-level protections.** Many states have laws that complement or exceed federal Title IX requirements. These laws often broaden definitions of sexual harassment, specify timeframes for investigations, provide stronger enforcement, allow for civil lawsuits in state court, and sometimes apply to private schools. You can also file complaints with [state civil rights agencies](#), which may also investigate and enforce compliance independently.

To learn about state-level protections, visit the Movement Advancement Project's [Safe School Laws pages](#) and [Democracy Maps](#). They have suggestions for filing civil rights complaints for all students. RAINN has a database of [state laws](#) defining sexual assault and other sex crimes and their penalties, consent, and child-mandated reporting.

**5. Contact your state department of education.** If you feel that your school district is mishandling your complaint and have exhausted all local options, including taking your complaint to the district superintendent and school board, consider contacting your state department of education. The U.S. Department of Education has a [list](#) of state education department contacts. Before escalating your complaint to the state level:

- Gather all your communications (emails, letters, call logs) with the school, district officials, and superintendent.
- Compile a timeline of events (when the harassment occurred, who was notified, and what actions were or weren't taken).

**6. Obtain legal advice.** If your district is unresponsive or indifferent to a report of sexual harm, consider seeking legal advice. Local legal aid or law school clinics may be able to offer valuable advice, assistance, or sustained support. An internet search on "[legal aid near me](#)" will produce a list of organizations that provide low cost or free services. Your local or regional American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) may also be a good source for referrals to local counsel if you are considering a lawsuit. Other resources for advice, referrals or possible legal support are the [National Women's Law Center](#) and [Equal Rights Advocates](#).

**7. Advocate for change locally.** Engage with school boards, [interview](#) or meet with the Title IX Coordinator or school Compliance Officer, engage in an education campaign, and [contact local district officials](#) to demand accountability and improved policies. Public pressure, including media exposure, can often lead to corrective action even in the absence of federal enforcement. Include youth voices and partnerships with local sexual assault response centers.



**8. Learn about trauma informed processes.** Regardless of whether a school believes that an incident of sexual harassment does or does not fall under current Title IX rules, they are still **required** to keep students safe. They must report suspicions of abuse to local authorities and investigate and remediate reported incidents of harassment or harm at school or at school-sponsored events. To do these things schools must interview people affected by the incidents to first determine safety planning needs and then gather information that will determine the next steps. But many school staff are not formally trained investigators and the interview process after an incident of sexual harassment or harm can be blunt, repetitive, and traumatizing. The **Forensic Experiential Trauma Interview (FETI) protocol** provides interviewers with a science-informed interviewing framework that maximizes opportunities for information collection and accurately documents the participant's experience in a neutral, equitable, and fair manner. Now is the best time to insist that your institution use staff or service providers trained in trauma-informed interview processes, such as FETI. Remember, no student can be obliged to participate in an investigation, whether they reported knowledge of an incident or were directly harmed.

**9. Cultivate local media outlets and build community support.** Local media coverage of sex discrimination, sexual harm and related issues, or a school's lack of meaningful response to serious incidents can be a strong point of leverage. You can also build community support through social media and parent groups, employing effective **strategies**.

**10. Remember: Title IX is still the law.** Federal Title IX regulations from 2020 remain in effect. They include the requirement for school districts to circulate widely their non-discrimination policy and the Title IX Coordinator's contact information. The district website or student handbook will typically include policies and articulated processes for sharing information about its Title IX reporting, investigation, and adjudication actions and timelines. Many schools use some or most of these processes as the basis for resolving non-Title IX incidents as well. A good summary of school practices that are consistent with the 2020 Title IX regulations can be found in this **resource** from the National Women's Law Center.

## More resources:

- Stop Sexual Assault in Schools [Filing Complaints webpage](#)
- [How to Gather Information About a School District's Title IX Policies](#)
- [Parents: You Can Become the Agent of Change for Title IX Policies in Your Schools](#)

## Stop Sexual Assault in Schools

- [Stop Sexual Assault in Schools Website](#)
- [SSAIS YouTube](#)
- [Instagram](#)
- Email [info@stopsexualassaultinschools.org](mailto:info@stopsexualassaultinschools.org)

