

U.S. Department of Education
Office for Civil Rights



Dear Colleague Letter Harassment and Bullying (October 26, 2010)
Background, Summary, and Fast Facts

What are the possible effects of student-on-student harassment and bullying?

- Lowered academic achievement and aspirations
- Increased anxiety
- Loss of self-esteem and confidence
- Depression and post-traumatic stress
- General deterioration in physical health
- Self-harm and suicidal thinking
- Feelings of alienation in the school environment, such as fear of other children
- Absenteeism from school

What does the Dear Colleague letter (DCL) do?

- Clarifies the relationship between bullying and discriminatory harassment under the civil rights laws enforced by the Department of Education's (ED) Office for Civil Rights (OCR).
- Explains how student misconduct that falls under an anti-bullying policy also may trigger responsibilities under one or more of the anti-discrimination statutes enforced by OCR.
- Reminds schools that failure to recognize discriminatory harassment when addressing student misconduct may lead to inadequate or inappropriate responses that fail to remedy violations of students' civil rights. Colleges and universities have the same obligations under the anti-discrimination statutes as elementary and secondary schools.
- Discusses racial and national origin harassment, sexual harassment, gender-based harassment, and disability harassment and illustrates how a school should respond in each case.

Why is ED Issuing the DCL?

ED is issuing the DCL to clarify the relationship between bullying and discriminatory harassment, and to remind schools that by limiting their responses to a specific application of an anti-bullying or other disciplinary policy, they may fail to properly consider whether the student misconduct also results in discrimination in violation of students' federal civil rights.

What are the anti-discrimination statutes that the Office for Civil Rights enforces?

- Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin.
- Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex.
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability.¹

What are a school's obligations under these anti-discrimination statutes?

- Once a school knows or reasonably should know of possible student-on-student harassment, it must take immediate and appropriate action to investigate or otherwise determine what occurred.
- If harassment has occurred, a school must take prompt and effective steps reasonably calculated to end the harassment, eliminate any hostile environment, and prevent its recurrence. These duties are a school's responsibility even if the misconduct also is covered by an anti-bullying policy and regardless of whether the student makes a complaint, asks the school to take action, or identifies the harassment as a form of discrimination.

How can I get help from OCR?

OCR offers technical assistance to help schools achieve voluntary compliance with the civil rights laws it enforces and works with schools to develop creative approaches to preventing and addressing discrimination. A school should contact the OCR enforcement office serving its jurisdiction for technical assistance. For contact information, please visit ED's website at <http://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OCR/contactus.cfm>.

A complaint of discrimination can be filed by anyone who believes that a school that receives Federal financial assistance has discriminated against someone on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, or age. The person or organization filing the complaint need not be a victim of the alleged discrimination, but may complain on behalf of another person or group. Information about how to file a complaint with OCR is at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/complaintintro.html> or by contacting OCR's Customer Service Team at 1-800-421-3481.

¹ OCR also enforces the Age Discrimination Act of 1975 and the Boy Scouts of America Equal Access Act. The DCL does not address these statutes.