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SCHOOL EMPLOYEE SEXUAL MISCONDUCT STUDY FINDS K–12 SCHOOL DISTRICTS FAIL TO IMPLEMENT KEY ELEMENTS OF TITLE IX

Charlottesville, VA (Oct. 31, 2017) — An estimated one in ten K–12 students—about 4.5 million children—will experience sexual abuse at the hands of a school employee at some point in their education, according to one study. Yet, a recent Department of Justice–sponsored study conducted by Magnolia Consulting, a Charlottesville-based education research firm, suggests that K–12 school districts might not fully implement federal guidance for preventing and responding to school employee sexual misconduct, even after an incident is reported.

School employee sexual misconduct is covered by Title IX of the educational amendments of 1972, the law most widely known for addressing gender equity in sports. However, the provisions of Title IX reach much further, prohibiting sexual discrimination and sexual harassment of any kind in educational institutions that receive federal funds. Title IX guidance, created by the Department of Education to support schools in implementing the law, requires that school districts have clear, written policies and procedures regarding school employee sexual misconduct; those policies and procedures, the guidance says, should include training to help staff, students, and parents recognize unacceptable behavior and other prevention measures, as well as processes to ensure a quick and effective response to complaints. Under the law, institutions that do not comply with these policy requirements—including K–12 schools and school districts—can be liable for civil damages if school employees engage in sexual misconduct involving students.

The Magnolia Consulting study focused on implementation of the key elements of Title IX guidance in school districts that had experienced incidents of school employee sexual misconduct. Researchers found that, although school districts reported improvements to some policies and procedures, as well as improvements in awareness, communication, and district leadership, various challenges—including an incomplete understanding of the full requirements of Title IX and the associated guidance—continued to hamper districts' efforts to comply with Title IX guidance. Representatives from all participating districts reported being unclear about what exactly Title IX requirements were and how they should be implemented. In addition, participants reported various challenges in implementing key elements of Title IX, including difficulty finding model policies, budget limitations, low parent engagement, fear of the consequences of reporting, and poor responses from criminal justice and child welfare agencies when incidents were reported.



According to Magnolia Consulting Senior Researcher Billie-Jo Grant, the principal investigator for the study, poor implementation of policy and prevention efforts may have negative consequences for both prevention and investigation of incidents, leading to long-term effects for victims. “The results of this study show us that more work needs to be done to guide and monitor the implementation of Title IX guidance and keep our students safe at school,” Grant says. “Title IX is only as effective as its implementation by school districts—staff, parents, and students are our eyes and ears for identifying and reporting these cases.”

The report concludes with several recommendations for addressing implementation challenges. School district leaders, researchers say, should review their district’s Title IX policies and implementation efforts, with support from federal and state departments of education, who need to develop model policies, establish accountability measures, and provide high-quality, low-cost training. Sexual misconduct training curricula should be included both in teacher training and in school employee orientation programs and training should be repeated periodically. Finally, policymakers and legislators need to issue parameters to guide education leaders in developing policies and advocate for evaluation, accountability, and funding for research. Researchers can analyze prevalence data to determine whether policies are working and contribute to prevention by analyzing the characteristics of both offenders and particularly vulnerable students.

Magnolia Consulting President Stephanie Wilkerson, who was the co-principal investigator for the study, said, “We see weekly headlines reporting cases of school employees sexually abusing students, and yet there is no national dialogue about what should be done to prevent it. This study emphasizes districts’ need for more effective communication, support, and accountability from federal and state leaders on implementing Title IX elements intended to help prevent school employee sexual misconduct. The protection of students from sexual predators in schools should be an issue we’re talking about; we hope this research study serves as a starting point for that conversation.”

“A Case Study of K–12 School Employee Sexual Misconduct: Lessons Learned from Title IX Policy Implementation” was executed as part of the National Institute of Justice Comprehensive School Safety Initiative, a federal program that awarded \$69 million in grants to study the causes and consequences of school violence. Researchers collected data from 92 participants (41 interviews and 10 focus groups), as well as a review of documentation and policies, in five geographically and demographically diverse districts. All five districts experienced an incident of school employee sexual misconduct in 2014; the data were collected in 2016–2017.

The project was supported by Award No. 2015-CK-BX-0009, awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.



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About Magnolia Consulting, LLC

Magnolia Consulting, LLC, is a woman-owned small business that cares about cultivating learning and positive change through high-quality research and evaluation. Headquartered in Charlottesville, Virginia, the Magnolia Consulting research team has expertise in research and evaluation in the areas of preK–20 education, organizational change and development, community-based social service programming, school-based sensitive issues, and informal learning. Over the past 12 years, Magnolia Consulting has designed and implemented more than 35 randomized control trials and quasi-experimental evaluations, including for projects funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Labor, the National Science Foundation, and numerous publishing companies and foundations. For more information, visit [www.http://www.magnoliaconsulting.org](http://www.magnoliaconsulting.org).