

Key Policy Letters from the Education Secretary and Deputy Secretary

February 28, 2013

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Dear Chief State School Officers,

President Obama has proclaimed February 2013 National Teen Dating Violence Awareness and Prevention Month.¹ This proclamation is the latest in a series of efforts by the Administration to create safer communities for young women by raising public awareness of gender-based violence, educating communities about how violence affects women and youths, and encouraging new efforts to prevent and respond to violence. At the same time, we recognize that gender-based violence affects boys and girls of all ages (from every socioeconomic group, race, religion, and sexual orientation; in all regions of the country; and in schools of every type), and its consequences can be significant for victims and their communities. As educators and administrators, you play an important role in protecting your students from victimization and its long-lasting effects on health and life outcomes. I want to inform you of the Department's recent efforts to support you and your school communities in preventing teen dating violence and other forms of gender-based violence.

Gender-based violence may include, but is not limited to, sexual assault, intimate partner or teen dating violence, and stalking. Gender-based violence may also include other behaviors that degrade and harm children and youths, such as human trafficking.

While these forms of violence can affect any member of the school community, girls typically face disproportionate rates of victimization, and that victimization can begin very early.² Many types of gender-based violence occur as early as elementary school.³ Of those who have ever experienced rape, physical violence, or stalking by an intimate partner, about 1 in 5 women and nearly 1 in 7 men were first victimized between 11 and 17 years of age.⁴

Gender-based violence has serious consequences for victims and their schools. Witnessing violence has been associated with decreased school attendance and academic performance.⁵ Further, teenage victims of physical dating violence are more likely than their non-abused peers to smoke, use drugs, engage in unhealthy dieting (e.g., taking diet pills or laxatives, vomiting to lose weight), engage in risky sexual behaviors, and attempt or consider suicide.⁶ Sex trafficking has devastating consequences for minors, including long-lasting physical and psychological trauma, disease (including HIV/AIDS), drug addiction, unwanted pregnancy, malnutrition, social ostracism, and even death.⁷ Although all victims of gender-based violence are affected negatively, research reveals that female victims of dating violence often experience more severe and longer-lasting consequences than do male victims.^{8,9}

Research shows that schools can make a difference in preventing teen violence and other forms of gender-based violence.¹⁰ As with most of the risk factors threatening the health and safety of our students, we should work to create safe school climates by strengthening students' social and emotional skills, by developing educator capacity to engage students and families, and by implementing multitiered behavioral supports.¹¹ However, such efforts are only the first step in preventing gender-based violence. Schools should educate their communities about prevention and identification, and develop locally tailored responses to address incidences of teen dating violence, stalking, sexual assault, and trafficking. Without a comprehensive approach that takes into account the unique challenges that these offenses present (e.g., victim reluctance to report, trauma from sexual violence), we will not be successful in reducing the number of school-aged victims, in providing effective support to traumatized youths, or in addressing the behavior and needs of perpetrators.

I urge you to take action and consider how your school community will reduce gender-based violence. Enclosed is the *What Schools Can Do* brief, which provides you with simple activities and resources to help you reduce gender-based violence and its consequences. Included are sample definitions of

behaviors associated with gender-based violence that may be helpful to you and your community in understanding this critically important issue. Further, the Department's National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments recently released a new teen dating violence training module – *Get Smart, Get Help, Get Safe*¹² – to build the capacity of specialized instructional support personnel to develop comprehensive school policies regarding teen dating violence, and to identify and respond appropriately to signs of abuse.

I look forward to continuing our work together to promote safe and respectful schools for America's students.

Sincerely,

/s/

Arne Duncan

Original Letter and Enclosures at <http://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/secletter/130228.html>