Title IX Coordinators: Key to Fighting Sex Discrimination in Education

Title IX—the landmark federal legislation mandating gender equity in education passed by Congress in 1972—says "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving federal financial assistance."

Title IX prohibits sex discrimination against students and employees in all levels of education in all institutions with education programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance. It covers all aspects of education from athletics to academics, and prohibits discrimination in facilities, benefits, opportunities, career guidance, school climate, testing, discipline, and much more.

In its first two decades, Title IX had an enormous impact reducing overt sex discrimination in American K-12 and postsecondary education, partly because of energetic implementation by the federal and state governments. In recent years, declining education budgets and changing priorities have reduced proactive enforcement even as gender equity issues have become more complex and resistance to the law has increased. The challenge is to restore the understanding and implementation of Title IX so our schools become truly equitable for all students, regardless of sex and gender identity.

One vital strategy to do this is to reinvigorate the role of the Title IX coordinator. Regulations require each recipient of federal financial assistance to "designate at least one employee to coordinate its efforts to comply with and carry out Title IX responsibilities" and to make the coordinators’ names and contact information public. In the law's first 20 years, Title IX coordinators helped end much of the overt sex discrimination in schools. Their work was often supported by funding that created networks of coordinators, who became gender equity leaders in their states, school districts, and postsecondary institutions, training teachers and administrators and developing proactive strategies to advance gender equity.

Much of that support has disappeared, even as inequities persist and the legal complexities of ending discrimination have increased. Too many educational institutions, both K-12 and postsecondary, have neglected to designate qualified Title IX coordinators. Or if appointed, this responsibility has been added to already heavy workloads of administrators and teachers who get little help or financial support for their Title IX work. Today’s coordinators must deal with more subtle forms of discrimination and more complicated regulations and guidance from the federal government. In many agencies they are also responsible for federal or state civil rights laws addressing race, disability and other issues.

It is critical to renew efforts to increase the ranks of effective Title IX coordinators and support them as equity leaders. Fortunately, there are some great opportunities to do this. The importance of Title IX has become more apparent as a remedy to fight sexual assault and harassment in schools and colleges. Recognizing problems in identifying Title IX coordinators, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) is collecting and publishing school district Title IX coordinator contacts in the 2014-15 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) and providing online public information on Title IX coordinators in postsecondary institutions.

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Another opportunity to highlight and strengthen the role and effectiveness of Title IX coordinators will be the ED’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) Title IX coordinator’s guidance letter for release in late 2014 or early 2015. The Feminist Majority Foundation is providing OCR with the following suggested criteria and strategies to enhance the effectiveness of Title IX Coordinators:

- **Assure that Title IX Coordinators (individually or collectively) are designated to cover all aspects of Title IX** in all entities with educational programs that are required to follow Title IX, including schools, research laboratories, libraries, museums, etc.

- **Encourage entities to designate a lead Title IX coordinator** who will assemble a team of other Title IX coordinators specializing in athletics, sexual harassment/assault, career technical education, academics, school discipline, and other topics.

- **Support a proactive role for Title IX coordinators**; in addition to their being responsive to resolve complaints and implement effective grievance procedures, they should also help educate institution staff, students, parents and others on the effects of gender stereotyping. They should proactively identify sex discrimination when it occurs, and educate students and staff to eliminate and prevent both deliberate and unconscious inequitable treatment.

- **Make it clear that Title IX is to be fully implemented in all levels of education** that receive federal assistance ranging from state education agencies to individual K-12 schools that may receive these funds indirectly to almost all public and private higher education institutions. Districts should be encouraged to have designated coordinators in individual schools or, at a minimum, easily accessible and well-trained expert district-level Title IX coordinators that adequately cover each school.

- **Contact information for all Title IX coordinators should be widely disseminated** and easily accessed by the public on websites of each school and district—an option not foreseen when the regulations were issued in 1975.

- **Federal policy should support the networking of Title IX coordinators** at the school, district, or state level to obtain advice and resources, and to collaborate in improving gender equity throughout institutions. These networks, as well as topic-focused networks involving gender equity experts in specific areas such as athletics, sexual assault prevention, STEM and more, can help increase the ability of Title IX coordinators to improve school climates, reduce gender stereotyping that hurts both sexes, and ensure long-term compliance with all aspects of Title IX.

- **Title IX coordinators should be encouraged to enlist community stakeholders** such as students, parents, nonprofit organizations, other educators, and gender equity advocates and experts. These stakeholders can identify and assist in addressing specific issues, or multiple issues, of sex discrimination and can increase community support for eliminating gender discrimination in schools.

With adequate support, appropriate training, and the capacity to participate in networks inside and outside educational institutions, Title IX coordinators can ensure that schools are truly equitable for all students, and that lingering effects of sex discrimination will no longer limit students and staff in achieving their full potential.

For additional information see [http://www.feminist.org/education/NetworkCoordinators.asp](http://www.feminist.org/education/NetworkCoordinators.asp) or contact Sue Klein, FMF Education Equity Director [sklein@feminist.org](mailto:sklein@feminist.org) (July 2014)