

## Flirting or Hurting

‘Boys will be boys’ won’t cut it anymore

A boy in Amy’s sophomore English class wouldn’t leave her alone. Nearly every day in class, he made obscene remarks to her, poked her, and laughed when she got mad.

One day, he told Amy, “I just dissected a frog, and I’m going to give the frog’s [sexual organ] to you.”

“It made me feel really disgusted and discouraged,” explains Amy, now a senior at the same high school in western Massachusetts. “I felt helpless because I didn’t know who to turn to.”

Amy confided in a girlfriend. “She said, ‘Ignore him. He’s a pain, but what can you do? You’ll be a baby if you tell.’”

But Amy couldn’t ignore him. Her grades were slipping. “I couldn’t concentrate. All I could think about was what he was going to do and say next. It made me not want to go to class—and English is one of my favorite subjects.”

Amy told her teacher about the harassment. The teacher moved Amy to the next row. “That made me feel like I was in the wrong,” Amy says now.

The final resolution: school ended. Amy, normally an A student, pulled a C in English. And that was that.

At the time, Amy didn’t call what was happening to her “sexual harassment.” Like generations of girls before her, Amy toughed it out. But girls today

don’t have to. They have the law on their side.

“Sexual harassment is a part of the daily fabric of school life,” says Nan Stein, director of the sexual harassment in schools project at the Wellesley (Massachusetts) College Center for Research on Women. “It’s so embedded and so accepted, most adults see it as inevitable.”

According to two national surveys conducted last year, the vast majority of teenage girls—and boys—say they’ve been the targets of sexual harassment at school (see “Hostile Hallways” box).

The most common incidents, according to kids, involve sexual comments and gestures, touching, pinching, and grabbing. Also typical are bra-snapping, skirt-flipping, and drawer-dropping.

Such behavior becomes sexual harassment, most agree, when it is unwelcome, unwanted, and interferes with a student’s right to equal educational opportunity. And that’s when it becomes illegal under Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972.

Though the law’s 22 years old, attention to the issue is relatively new. “The Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas hearings raised the nation’s consciousness, and we now have an administration that believes this is a problem,” explains Ellen Vargyas, senior counsel at the National Women’s Law Center in Washington, D.C.

Still, she adds, it was a 1992 Supreme Court ruling that brought the issue home. In *Franklin v. Gwinnett County*

Public Schools, the Court ruled that students can sue recipients of federal funding (schools or school districts) for sexual harassment claims. And they can win “compensatory damages”—in a word, money.

“Now it’s clear,” Vargyas says. “Schools need to take complaints seriously. They need to have rules and accessible procedures for handling them. And they need to take corrective action.”

If they don’t, warns Nan Stein, “get ready for the depositions.”—Many school districts and NEA members aren’t waiting for the lawyers. They’re acting now.

Those with successful programs seem to agree on a few key points: Kids want to talk about sexual harassment. Kids learn best from other kids. Kids need to be involved in designing accessible policies and procedures to deal with complaints.

As Rhode Island guidance counselor Maureen Tessier says, “We want this to be a student issue. None of our mindsets matches those of 15- and 16-year-olds.”

With that in mind, here’s what’s going on in a few places around the country.

- Acting out—on stage—is a popular way students choose to educate each other about sexual harassment. In southwestern Wisconsin, more than 6,000 students over the past three years have seen “Alice in Sexual Assault Land,” a 45-minute play about everything from sexual harassment to date rape.

With advice and assistance from NEA teacher-member Laurel Hoeth, the play—full of characters from children’s literature—was written and is regularly performed by Stevens Point High School students.

After each performance, the play’s actors meet in small groups with students to discuss key messages. The most important goal, says Hoeth, “is to get students comfortable enough to talk about the issues.”

- Also on stage are students at Ponaganset High School in North Scituate, Rhode Island. With a nudge from principal Richard Oswald and some help from NEA members, students there are putting on skits for the rest of the school.

In one, explains senior Jaime LaPorte, “a boy treats four girls at their lockers in the same way, but they all react differently.” The point: sexual harassment is in the eye of the beholder.

The students are also involved in creating a more accessible policy for dealing with sexual harassment complaints. Their proposed policy encourages targets to go to harassers—with or without a student advocate or school employee—and ask that the offensive behavior be stopped. Students follow-up with a written note, which they keep a copy of.

If the behavior doesn’t stop, the policy allows for peer mediation or intervention by the administration.

- At Framingham High School in Massachusetts, consumer and family studies teacher Ellen Makynen is one of 46 teachers to pilot test *Flirting or Hurting?*— an NEA Human and Civil Rights curriculum on sexual harassment for students in grades 6-12.

Makynen, who teaches seniors, was surprised at students' interest in the material. "They were very serious about it. They listened to each other and were quite genuine in their responses."

For most students, Makynen explains, there were revelations. "It's quite a moment for kids when they realize that sexual harassment is against the law, and that it can stop if they want it to."

The curriculum has been so popular with students—and parents—that Makynen says school staff will try to offer the unit to others at the high school and to middle school students as well.

The NEA curriculum is available nationally. (see Resources box).

- Just outside the Twin Cities in Minnesota, middle school health education teacher Rosemary Fink is in her second year of teaching a brief unit on sexual harassment to eighth graders.

"It's been very well received," Fink says. "The girls say, 'Thanks for telling us we can say no.' And the boys say, 'I'm glad we were told what's unacceptable. We never knew it wasn't right.'" Teaching the curriculum brought back

memories, Fink says. "We're talking about the same behaviors I remember as a kid. There was a certain hall girls just didn't walk down. But I grew up when you just took it or ignored it."

Times have changed—and so has Fink. "A few years ago, when I saw kids standing in the hall eyeing a girl walking by, I was just as uncomfortable as the girl they were eyeing, but I didn't do anything. Now, I'll step in."

"As teachers," Fink notes, "we have to retrain ourselves, too."

—Stefanie Weiss

---

### 'Hostile Hallways'

Two national surveys released in 1993 show that students find sexual harassment in school a widespread and serious problem.

A Harris poll sponsored by the American Association of University Women reached 1,600 public school students in grades 8-11. Key findings:

- Four out of 5 students—85 percent of girls and 76 percent of boys—report that they have been the target of some form of sexual harassment during their school lives.
- Two-thirds of students have been the targets of sexual comments, jokes, looks, or gestures.
- More than half of the students report having been touched, grabbed, or pinched in a sexual way at school.

- One in 10 students say they have been forced to do something sexual at school other than kissing.
- Of those reporting harassment, 66 percent say it took place in the halls; 55 percent say it took place in the classroom.

A survey by Seventeen magazine brought 4,300 responses from girls in grades 2-12. An analysis of 2,000 responses showed a similar percentage of girls reporting sexual harassment in school, with little difference by type of school attended or by racial or ethnic background.

---

## Resources

- *Flirting or Hurting?*, 1994. The NEA curriculum for 6-12 graders written by Nan Stein and Lisa Sjoström will be published this summer. For ordering information, call 800/229-4200.
- *Sexual Harassment in Schools*, a videotape produced for Teacher TV by NEA and The Learning Channel. Stock number A050-10119. \$15 plus \$2.50 per tape p&h. NEA Professional Library, 800/229-4200.
- *Tune In To Your Rights: A Guide for Teenagers about Turning Off Sexual Harassment*, 1985. Also available in Spanish. \$3 includes p&h. Michigan residents add 4 percent sales tax. Make checks out to the University of Michigan. Send to PEO, 1005 School of Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI 48109, 313/763-9910.
- *Hostile Hallways: The AAUW Survey on Sexual Harassment in America's Schools*, 1993. \$11.95 (\$8.95 for AAUW members) plus \$4 p&h. AAUW Sales Office, P.O. Box 251, Annapolis Junction, MD 20701, 800/225-9998, ext. 246.
- *Secrets in Public: Sexual Harassment in Our Schools*. a report on the results of a Seventeen magazine survey by Nan Stein, Nancy Marshall, and Linda Tropp, 1993. \$11 includes p&h. Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Publications Dept., 106 Central St., Wellesley, MA 02181, 617/283-2510.

---

**Q:** Are You Ready To Help? Do You Know How?

**A:** What should school employees do when one student sexually harasses another? NEA Today asked Nan Stein, director of the sexual harassment in schools project at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. A former middle school teacher, Stein has been studying school-based sexual harassment for 15 years.

**Q:** What should bus drivers do when they hear a group of students taunting a girl?

**A:** A driver should say, "I hear what you're saying. If I hear it one more time, I'm turning names in to the principal." Of course, the driver needs to know that the principal and the school's sexual harassment policy will back him or her up.

Q: What should teachers do when they see a skirt-flipping incident?

A: A teacher should immediately go up to the students. At that point, some girls may say it's okay or it's mutual activity. The teacher must intervene and take names regardless. The teacher should tell the students it's not acceptable school behavior. These events can't be treated like isolated incidents—probably they're not.

Q: What should custodians do when they find sexual graffiti in the bathroom?

A: A custodian should write it down and report it to the principal, then clean it off immediately. School staff need to treat this kind of targeted message differently from other graffiti.

Q: What should teachers do when they see a boy brushing up against a girl in class?

A: A teacher should handle such a situation with discretion. The teacher should go over to the students involved and say, "There's too much of something going on here that doesn't need to go on to do your project." A teacher shouldn't make a target feel like she's got to speak up before an adult will intervene.

Q: What should school employees do when they hear students calling another student a "slut"?

A: An adult can say, "Cut it out. I don't like that kind of talk." It takes time to intervene every single time. Still, students have a right to expect that if something frightening, unpleasant, or illegal is happening in school, someone in authority will intervene to stop it.

***NEA Today, April 1994***