

ETR Virtual Vitality **Creating & Maintaining Safe** **Spaces for Virtual Education**

Online tools and video conferencing technologies provide educators with exciting, innovative opportunities to reach students in new ways, get creative with new teaching strategies, and maintain meaningful connections.

Unfortunately, these technologies also provide opportunities for inappropriate conduct, including sexual harassment, gender-based harassment, and cyberbullying.



Data from the CDC's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) show that about 15% of high school students experience cyberbullying. Female students are much more likely to report cyberbullying than male students (20% and 10% respectively); lesbian, gay, and bisexual students report the highest rate of exposure at 27%.¹

While the YRBS at the middle school level does not provide national statistics, the results of individual communities strongly suggest that rates of cyberbullying are significantly higher in middle schools.

As K-12 educators, it's our responsibility to create and maintain safe and supportive learning environments whether in real world or virtual settings. This tip sheet provides information on how to keep your virtual classroom free of sexual and/or gender-based harassment and guidelines for how to respond when incidents occur in the virtual world.

Keeping Virtual Classrooms Safe

Popular video conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, GoToMeeting and others provide detailed procedures for keeping their virtual environments safe. We have curated their overall guidance here, but strongly encourage schools and districts to ensure they have reviewed and implemented security protections available through these platforms.

Your district's information technology staff can also help you become familiar with the security features of video conferencing platforms. Please reach out to them for guidance.

Endnotes

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [2017] Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data. Available at: www.cdc.gov/yrebs. Accessed on 04/02-2020.

Overall Tips

- + **Use “waiting room” features.** These features allow teachers to create a separate virtual room for participants and admit them to the virtual classroom one at a time after verifying their identity.
- + **Use password protections.** Most platforms allow hosts to create passwords that are required to enter the virtual classroom. Do not share the password using social media and take the time to create a secure password that combines numbers, letters, and symbols.
- + **Disable screen sharing by default.** Your platform should allow you to prevent participants from sharing their screen without your permission. During the lesson, you may allow students to share their screen on a case by case basis.
- + **Once a virtual lesson has started, lock the meeting.** Locking the meeting prevents additional persons from joining the session.
- + **Update your software to the latest version.** Make sure you have the latest version of your preferred platform’s software installed, as it will include the most robust security features available.

Virtual Classroom Management Tips

Methods for managing disruptive and/or offensive behavior in the virtual classroom are similar to the methods you employ in your real-world classroom:

1. Create and establish group agreements and behavioral expectations at the beginning of a lesson series and refer to them briefly at the beginning of each class. You can come up with several on your own, such as “treat each other with respect and kindness” and “do not use demeaning, insulting, or offensive language.” If possible, allow students to come up with their own standards of behavior. Including student recommendations helps set social norms in your classroom and underscores the importance of civility.
2. If you see or hear a student breaking your virtual classroom’s group agreements, it’s important to set clear boundaries. In the virtual classroom, you have a few options.
 - If a student posts an offensive or harassing statement or picture in your platform’s chat, you can delete it. In Zoom, for example, hover over the post you want to delete, click the “more” icon (...), and choose delete. As the host, you will still be able to see the post, but it will not be viewable to other students.
 - If a student says or does something that may constitute sexual and/or gender-based harassment under Title IX, address the student using a calm and respectful tone to remind them of group agreements and ask them to stop their behavior. Note the student’s name so you can follow up with them after the virtual class has concluded to underscore the importance of your group agreements. To remain in compliance with Title IX, it’s also important to refer them to your school’s administrator in charge of student conduct and/or refer them to your district’s Title IX Coordinator. If you are in doubt as to whether the behavior you witness is “serious

enough” to report, it’s generally best to go ahead with a report and let your Title IX Coordinator make the decision about how to proceed.

3. You may choose to record your virtual classroom lesson. If you do record your lesson(s), be aware that most districts require signed parent/guardian permission for their children to be photographed, audio recorded, and/or filmed. It’s also important to notify all participants that you are recording. Recording a session also tends to put most students on their best behavior and provides a record of the actions of students who engage in offensive or harassing behavior for your school’s administrators or your district’s Title IX Coordinator.
4. If a student makes a verbal threat or engages in a verbal assault on you or another student, you can remove them from the meeting just as you would send them out of your real-world classroom. In these cases, it’s particularly critical to make a referral to your school’s administration and/or your District’s Title IX Coordinator. As an example, Google Hangout allows you to use your mouse to hover over a student’s name and manually remove them. Be aware that students can rejoin the hangout and you should be vigilant to ensure they don’t “sneak back in.”

Overview Of Title IX Law & District Policies

Title IX is the federal law that prohibits discrimination based on sex, including sexual and/or gender-based harassment, in all K-12 districts and schools that receive federal funding. K-12 districts and schools have a legal obligation to investigate and remediate cases of sexual and/or gender-based harassment, even when the behaviors occur online.

Nearly all K-12 districts and schools have policies that comply with the Title IX law. Your district should have clear policies governing student conduct, hate-motivated behavior, bullying, cyberbullying, and sexual and gender-based harassment. Many districts also have policies around maintaining professional boundaries when using online technologies, including the use of smart phones, social media, online learning, and video conferencing. We strongly encourage you to carefully review your district’s policies.

When conducting education online, and when using video conferencing technology specifically, our role as educators is to maintain compliance with Title IX and your district’s policies that protect the safety and wellbeing of all students, regardless of their sex, gender, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity.

Our Responsibilities Under Title IX

Our Title IX responsibilities as K-12 educators, support staff, administrators, and other adults in the school community can be summed up in three words - eliminate, prevent, and address sexual and/or gender-based harassment.

We must take immediate and effective actions to **ELIMINATE** sexual and/or gender-based harassment when it occurs, **PREVENT** its recurrence, and **ADDRESS** its effects.

In most states, educators and other school employees are also mandated reporters. Beyond the moral obligation to protect students, teachers are also legally obligated to report any signs of abuse or neglect of a child to the appropriate authorities immediately.

In the context of sexual and/or gender-based harassment under Title IX, educators are legally required to report incidents of sexual and/or gender-based harassment to their school's principal or their district's Title IX Coordinator. Now is a great time to re-familiarize yourself with your District's Title IX personnel and reporting protocols.

Behaviors That May Constitute Harassment Under Title IX

Title IX Regulations issued in May 2020 define sexual harassment as conduct on the basis of sex that satisfies one or more of the following: (1) an employee of the recipient (i.e., any district that receives federal funding) conditioning the provision of an aid, benefit, or service of the recipient on an individual's participation in unwelcome sexual conduct; (2) unwelcome conduct determined by a reasonable person to be so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it effectively denies a person equal access to the recipient's education program or activity; or (3) "sexual assault" as defined in the Clery Act, and "dating violence", "domestic violence", and "stalking" as defined in Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). This standard has generated debate over what behaviors constitute harassment under the law, and those debates can be complex and nuanced. For example, there's no doubt that a single incident of sexual assault constitutes harassment under the law, but it's less clear whether a single incident of verbal abuse (such as using a slur based on sexual orientation) constitutes harassment. Reporting all incidents to your administrator and/or district Title IX coordinator is a strongly recommended best practice.

While there is a wide range of behavior that might constitute harassment under Title IX, here are a few examples of behaviors that may occur in virtual environments:

5. Sharing suggestive or obscene text, drawings, jokes, or comments in chat;
6. Using slurs based on sex, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity;
7. Making sexual gestures; or displaying sexually suggestive objects, pictures, or cartoons;
8. Making disparaging remarks to a student or acting aggressively toward a student because that student displays mannerisms or a style of dress perceived as indicative of the other sex.

Helpful Links On Cyberbullying & Virtual Classroom Security

1. **Overall Guidance on Cyberbullying**
<https://www.common sense.org/education/articles/teachers-essential-guide-to-cyberbullying-prevention>
2. **Zoom's Best Practices for Securing Virtual Classrooms**
<https://blog.zoom.us/wordpress/2020/03/27/best-practices-for-securing-your-virtual-classroom/>
3. **How to Prevent Uninvited Guests**
<https://blog.zoom.us/wordpress/2020/03/20/keep-uninvited-guests-out-of-your-zoom-event/>

4. **Google Classroom & Hangouts – Teachers' Guide to Essential Features**
<https://www.common sense.org/education/articles/teachers-essential-guide-to-google-classroom>
5. **GoToMeeting Security Best Practices**
<https://blog.gotomeeting.com/5-best-practices-staying-secure-gotomeeting/>



**We hope these tips are helpful!
Let us know if you have questions**

ETR will be continuing the Virtual Vitality series to provide support for best practices in designing and delivering virtual learning processes. In addition, we are offering consultation services to assist constituents in learning best practices for virtual design, delivery and follow-up.

For information about ETR's K12T9 Initiative, please contact Dr. John Shields at K12T9@etr.org