

U.S. Department of Education

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Dear Colleague Letter

[OCR-00066]

THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY

April 24, 2013

Dear Colleague:

The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in the United States Department of Education (Department) is responsible for enforcing Federal civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination based on race, color, national origin, sex, disability, or age by recipients of Federal financial assistance (recipient(s)) from the Department.¹ Although a significant portion of the complaints filed with OCR in recent years have included retaliation claims, OCR has never before issued public guidance on this important subject. The purpose of this letter is to remind school districts, postsecondary institutions, and other recipients that retaliation is also a violation of Federal law.² This letter seeks to clarify the basic principles of retaliation law and to describe OCR's methods of enforcement.

The ability of individuals to oppose discriminatory practices, and to participate in OCR investigations and other proceedings, is critical to ensuring equal educational opportunity in accordance with Federal civil rights laws. Discriminatory practices are often only raised and remedied when students, parents, teachers, coaches, and others can report such practices to school administrators without the fear of retaliation. Individuals should be commended when they raise concerns about compliance with the Federal civil rights laws, not punished for doing so.

The Federal civil rights laws make it unlawful to retaliate against an individual for the purpose of interfering with any right or privilege secured by these laws.³ If, for example, an individual brings concerns about possible civil rights problems to a school's attention, it is unlawful for the school to retaliate against that individual for doing so. It is also unlawful to retaliate against an individual because he or she made a complaint, testified, or participated in any manner in an OCR investigation or proceeding. Thus, once a student, parent, teacher, coach, or other individual complains formally or informally to a school about a potential civil rights violation or participates in an OCR investigation or proceeding, the recipient is prohibited from retaliating (including intimidating, threatening, coercing, or in any way discriminating against the individual) because of the individual's complaint or participation. OCR will continue to vigorously enforce this prohibition against retaliation.

If OCR finds that a recipient retaliated in violation of the civil rights laws, OCR will seek the recipient's voluntary commitments through a resolution agreement to take specific measures to remedy the identified noncompliance.⁴ Such a resolution agreement must be designed both to ensure that the individual who was retaliated against receives redress and to ensure that the recipient complies with the prohibition against retaliation in the future. OCR will determine which remedies, including monetary relief, are appropriate based on the facts presented in each specific case.

Steps OCR could require a recipient to take to ensure compliance in the future include, but are not limited to:

- training for employees about the prohibition against retaliation and ways to avoid engaging in retaliation;
- adopting a communications strategy for ensuring that information concerning retaliation is continually being conveyed to employees, which may include incorporating the prohibition against retaliation into relevant policies and procedures; and
- implementing a public outreach strategy to reassure the public that the recipient is committed to complying with the prohibition against retaliation.

If OCR finds that a recipient engaged in retaliation and the recipient refuses to voluntarily resolve the identified area(s) of noncompliance or fails to live up to its commitments in a resolution agreement, OCR will take appropriate enforcement action. The enforcement actions available to OCR include initiating administrative proceedings to suspend, terminate, or refuse to grant or continue financial assistance made available through the Department to the recipient; or referring the case to the U.S. Department of Justice for judicial proceedings.⁵

OCR is available to provide technical assistance to entities that request assistance in complying with the prohibition against retaliation or any other aspect of the civil rights laws OCR enforces. Please visit <http://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OCR/contactus.cfm> (<http://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OCR/contactus.cfm>) to contact the OCR regional office that serves your state or territory.

Thank you for your help in ensuring that America's educational institutions are free from retaliation so that concerns about equal educational opportunity can be openly raised and addressed.

Sincerely,

/s/

Seth M. Galanter
Acting Assistant Secretary for Civil
Rights

¹ OCR enforces Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VI), Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), the Age Discrimination Act of 1975 (Age Act), and the Boy Scouts of America Equal Access Act (Boy Scouts Act). OCR also shares enforcement responsibilities with the Department of Justice for Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II), which prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in state and local government services, programs and activities, regardless of whether they receive Federal financial assistance.


² The Federal courts have repeatedly affirmed that retaliation is a violation of the Federal civil rights laws enforced by OCR. See, e.g., *Jackson v. Birmingham Board of Education*, 544 U.S. 167 (2005); *Peters v. Jenney*, 327 F.3d 307, 320-21 (4th Cir. 2003); *Weeks v. Harden Mfg. Corp.*, 291 F.3d 1307, 1311 (11th Cir. 2002).

³ See 34 C.F.R. § 100.7(e) (Title VI); 34 C.F.R. § 106.71 (Title IX) (incorporating 34 C.F.R. §100.7(e) by reference); 34 C.F.R. § 104.61 (Section 504) (incorporating 34 C.F.R. §100.7(e) by reference); and 34 C.F.R. §108.9 (Boy Scouts Act) (incorporating 34 C.F.R. §100.7(e) by reference). Title II and the Age Act have similar regulatory language. See 28 C.F.R. § 35.134 (Title II); and 34 C.F.R. § 110.34 (Age Act).

⁴ See OCR's Case Processing Manual for more information about resolution agreements, *available at* <http://www.ed.gov/ocr/docs/ocrcpm.html> (<http://www.ed.gov/ocr/docs/ocrcpm.html>).

⁵ See 34 C.F.R. § 100.8.

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