

The Importance of Title IX

Remarks of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan at George Washington University, April 20, 2010

FOR RELEASE:
April 20, 2010

I am pleased that the Department is issuing this Dear Colleague letter on athletic programs today. I think this reaffirmation of longstanding policy will help to bolster Title IX and assure that educational institutions that receive federal financial assistance do not discriminate on the basis of sex. And I think this announcement takes on special meaning today as we mourn the passing of civil rights pioneer Dorothy Height, who dedicated her life to the fight for equality.

I am a big believer in the value of college sports, for both men and women. I can think of no other institution, apart perhaps from the military, that does as much to shape our future leaders as intercollegiate athletics. Student athletes learn lessons on the court and the playing field that are hard to learn anywhere else—lessons about teamwork, commitment, courage, and discipline.

I am thrilled that some of those shining examples of women athletes and leaders are here with us this afternoon, including members of the U.S. Olympics Ice Hockey Team. But it is precisely because college athletics play such a critical role, that we must be vigilant about ensuring equal opportunity for men and women in college sports. We cannot take steps that unnecessarily dissuade women or limit their opportunity to pursue sports.

This is a personal issue for me. I played college sports, but so did my sister. She was, by the way, a much better basketball player than me, and was an early beneficiary of Title IX. But I'll tell you something else that not many people realize. My mother was the best athlete in our family. It drove me crazy, but she beat me one-on-one for years. Now, unfortunately, my mother never got to play college sports. She never had the joy and opportunity to match her skills against her peers in basketball or tennis at college because she went to college before there was a Title IX.

Title IX is one of the great civil rights success stories in education, and it owes a lot to the tireless support of lawmakers like Vice President Biden. Before Title IX, in 1972, less than 30,000 female students participated in sports and recreational programs at NCAA member institutions. That number has increased nearly six-fold since then. At the high school level, the number of girls participating in athletics has increased ten-fold since 1972, to three million girls today.

Studies have documented repeatedly that the benefits of athletics stretch far beyond the playing field. Women athletes are more likely to graduate from college than female students who don't play sports. They are less likely to use drugs, get pregnant as teenagers, or become obese. One recent rigorous study of Title IX by Wharton professor Betsey Stevenson found that up to 40 percent of the overall rise in employment among women in the 25 to 34 year-old age group was attributable to Title IX.

Contrary to the myth, Title IX has not starved men's athletic programs. Since Title IX was enacted, the number of men's and women's teams has grown and the number of men and women playing sports has risen. We have absolutely come a long way. But we still have a distance to travel.

The action we are taking today to strengthen Title IX is just one of a series of steps that we are taking to reinvigorate civil rights enforcement. To take just one example, our Office for Civil Rights is going to redouble our enforcement of Title IX with respect to sexual harassment and sexual violence on college campuses.

As President Obama has pointed out, Title IX "does not even mention sports... Title IX has the potential to make similar, striking advances in the opportunities that girls have in the STEM disciplines." We are going to ensure that schools make available a rigorous curriculum that prepares all students—regardless of gender—for both college and career, including access to science, technology, engineering, and math curricula.

And now I'd like to turn the microphone over to Joy Cheek, a Duke basketball player who not only was drafted by the Indiana Fever last week but has demonstrated her excellence in the classroom. She is a Public Policy major at Duke. Last summer, she interned in the Economic Policy Department in the office of Vice President Biden.

###