



# Ensuring Success in School, Supporting Survivors

Illinois Schools' Responses to  
Elementary and Secondary School  
Survivors of Domestic and Sexual Violence



**SHRIVER  
CENTER**

Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law

# About this report

Recent media coverage of high-profile sexual misconduct allegations and the growing #MeToo movement have illuminated the magnitude of gender-based violence and the toll that it takes on adults, disproportionately women. But what of adolescents and children? In the absence of clear, survivor-centered, trauma-informed policies, the consequences of domestic and sexual violence for students in elementary and secondary schools can be devastating. Without proper support, student survivors often struggle to complete their education, which can have life-long consequences for their economic stability and ability to thrive.

This report is a result of ongoing policy advocacy on the impact of domestic and sexual violence on the education of elementary and secondary students who are survivors of such violence by the Women's Law and Policy Initiative (WLPI) at the Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law (Shriver Center). Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with students, domestic and sexual violence service providers, and school social workers throughout Illinois. The report provides a snapshot of the responses to the violence by school personnel and recommendations for change.

The Shriver Center works to ensure that low-income people, including survivors of domestic and sexual violence, have access to the supports they need to achieve economic stability. This report was made possible with support from Chicago Foundation for Women (CFW) and Loyola University of Chicago Center for Urban Research and Learning (CURL) "From Programming to Policy" project. The authors especially thank CURL in assisting with the conceptualization, research, and analysis for the report, and CFW for its ongoing support. The authors would also like to thank the members of the Ensuring Success in School Coalition for both participating in and inviting students to participate in the focus groups and interviews, and, of course, the students for their participation.

## About the Authors

Wendy Pollack is the director of the Women’s Law and Policy Initiative at the Shriver Center. Ms. Pollack has worked extensively on gender-based violence and its impact on women’s and girls’ economic security and advancement, including on their education, employment, public benefits, health and safety, and family. Ms. Pollack started the Ensuring Success in School Initiative in 2003, and convenes a statewide coalition of advocates, service providers, school personnel, students, and parents and guardians. One of the goals of the Initiative and the coalition is to ensure that elementary and secondary students who are survivors of domestic or sexual violence stay in school, stay safe, succeed academically, and complete their education.

Ellison Snider was the 2017-18 Domestic Violence Education and Opportunity VISTA, working with the WLPI and Ensuring Success in School Initiative.

---

Graphic design by [Sarah Sommers Design](#).

Photo credits: cover, Kyo Azuma; page 3, Fabio Neo Amato; page 6, rawpixel on Unsplash; page 10, NeONBRAND on Unsplash; page 14, Chris Benson; page 19, Annie Spratt.





# Student Survivors Need Support to Succeed in School

**Students who are survivors of domestic or sexual violence deserve an opportunity to succeed in school.**

The consequences of domestic and sexual violence for students in elementary and secondary school can be devastating, far-reaching, and long lasting. In addition to suffering the mental, physical, economic, and social consequences of violence, student survivors often experience a decline in their academic performance.

Contributing factors include:

- a decline in school attendance;
- an inability to concentrate in class;
- growing social isolation;
- feeling scared and unsafe in school;
- and, in too many cases, simply dropping out.

**Every Illinois elementary and secondary school should have survivor-centered, trauma-informed policies in place to ensure that student survivors of domestic and sexual violence can succeed in school.** Such policies should provide clear guidance to students, parents and guardians, and school personnel on how to appropriately respond to student survivors and support them in their quest to heal. It doesn't matter who the perpetrator is — a parent, a teacher, a boyfriend or girlfriend, a stranger; where the violence occurred — in school, at home, at a party; or when the violence occurred — yesterday, six weeks ago, six years ago. Nor does it matter if the violence is the subject of a criminal investigation or criminal charges have been pursued. What matters most is that survivors are supported in their quest to heal, and that this support is tailored to their specific needs.

This report provides a snapshot of Illinois K-12 schools' responses to student survivors of domestic and sexual violence. The report's findings are based on four focus groups and 31 in-person and phone interviews conducted in 2015 and 2016; a total of 59 students (middle school and high school students) and service providers participated. The participants were diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, and LGBTQ status; in addition, the participant service providers served diverse student populations. Geographically, participants were from all over the state, including Chicago and surrounding suburbs, and smaller cities and rural areas in northern, central, and southern Illinois. The schools varied in size, the availability of resources, and their response to and support of students and their experiences of domestic and sexual violence.

Although since 2007 Illinois law requires K-12 schools to conduct trainings by experts in domestic and sexual violence once every two years for all school personnel who work with students, including teachers, administrators, counselors, and nurses, the lack of comprehensive school policies creates barriers to student survivors' success in school. Focus groups uncovered issues due to the lack of survivor-centered, trauma-informed policies in the following areas:

- **Protocol and Training** — Protocols that are sensitive to survivors and their needs were too often either absent or not followed by school personnel. For example, staff generally did not know when and to whom they report. Compounding the problem, the required training of school personnel is generally not conducted, leaving school personnel unequipped to appropriately respond to disclosures of domestic and sexual violence.

- **Confidentiality** — School personnel often lacked understanding of the need for confidentiality and how to ensure it. Even when processes were in place, they were often unaware of confidential reporting processes. Routinely, confidentiality was either knowingly breached or there was a lack of privacy necessary to maintain confidentiality.
- **Accommodations and Support Services** — Schools too often did not provide any accommodations in response to student survivors trauma — whether academic-, safety-, or health-related. And if offered, in-school support was often inadequate, and relationships with external service providers in the community that could offer expert support to student survivors were lacking.
- **Revictimization** — School personnel often dismissed the experiences of student survivors out of disbelief or through minimization, criticism, or even punishment.

It's time to ensure that all schools have a survivor-centered, trauma-informed written domestic and sexual violence policy that provides clarity, transparency, and accountability of school personnel. It's time for change.



# Protocol and Training

**“If you tell someone like the teacher, they probably won’t know how to help you.”** — Student

Written school policies that directly address the needs and concerns of student survivors of domestic or sexual violence coupled with effective protocols and training are essential to student survivors’ healing and success. In the case of school personnel’s response to student survivors, the maxim, “first, do no harm” applies not only to doing the wrong thing, but also to doing nothing.

Implementing survivor-centered, trauma-informed policies and training increases student confidence in their school’s ability to provide support. This has a positive impact on school climate when trust forms between students and school personnel, leading survivors to feel more comfortable reporting an issue and asking for help. Student survivors will not come forward if they do not have faith in their school personnel’s ability to empathetically and adequately support them.

The lack of protocols and training stymies school personnel from providing sensitive, supportive, and timely assistance to student survivors. This, in turn, thwarts the goal of ensuring that student survivors stay in school, stay safe, succeed academically, and complete their education.

## Findings

Students and service providers reported a persistent lack of a written policy or customary protocol for school personnel to follow to deal with revelations of domestic and sexual violence. Moreover, despite [training required under the 2007 Illinois law](#), training is not taking place.

Student survivors know that school personnel are often unequipped to support them. One student reported that when she approached her teacher about sexual harassment, the teacher told her, “I don’t know. I don’t want to get involved with that.” Clearly, this teacher had not received any guidance or was unaware of any school policy or protocols that would result in a better response. Student participants preferred talking to a trained social worker rather than to a teacher they know is not equipped to handle the situation. However, too many schools have no in-house social workers and students were not always aware of community-based service providers. Service provider participants indicated that most schools they were familiar with had no protocols in place for interfacing with domestic or sexual violence providers that can provide counseling and educational support. And, although some schools have school personnel that were supportive, there was great variation in students’ experiences depending on who was responding to their experiences of domestic and sexual violence. This lack of prescribed policy and protocol leaves student survivors grappling with the violence and associated trauma on their own, often in a very emotionally and psychologically vulnerable state.

Service providers explained how the lack of training for school personnel results in a lack of empathy for students who experience domestic and sexual violence. This has translated into school personnel being dismissive of survivors’ experiences of violence, as if unworthy of serious consideration, student survivors feeling unsafe and forced to drop out, and leaving students fending for themselves.

Service providers also noted that most school personnel did not understand the requirements for reporting abuse and neglect situations to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), nor did they understand if and when they were required to call the police. Many survivors do not wish to involve DCFS or the police. Failing to make a report when one is required or requested by the survivor or making one that is not required and against the wishes of the survivor, can lead to additional harm to the survivor. Survivors must be told of the full range of options and rights so that they can make fully-informed decisions that is in their best interests. Students should not be in the position of relying on misinformation from untrained school personnel as in the case of one survivor (Rachel) who was discouraged from pursuing a restraining order against her abuser by a school security guard.



Participants agreed that training of school personnel is essential to understanding survivors' confidentiality and privacy concerns, the need for accommodations and support and what that entails, and preventing the survivors' revictimization by dismissing or minimizing students' disclosures or blaming and shaming them. One service provider participant shared a story of how, because staff members did not understand the value of the service, survivors' confidentiality and healing process was jeopardized: "I remember doing a group with students based on domestic violence, and this was specifically connected with community violence...So the group would be interrupted by [school] staff. Staff would come in and try and sit in on the group even though it was a confidential group, and kind of, not poke fun, but kind of make light of what things were happening...and kind of changed the setting so students didn't feel safe talking. And it's tough when you're coming in as a provider and it's just you're trying to make that space safe for everyone. So, I think sometimes a lack of respect for what service we're providing can definitely impact what students experience." It is clear that, without proper training, school personnel can hinder the recovery of student survivors.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations related to protocol and training are intended to provide a baseline for schools to ensure student survivors stay in school, stay safe, succeed academically, and complete their education.

- **A survivor-centered, trauma-informed written school policy** that provides clarity, transparency, and accountability of school personnel, that is accessible to all students, parents and guardians, and school personnel, and is implemented properly, is essential. The policy should outline all protocols and procedures, including but not limited to those related to initial disclosure or awareness of the violence, confidentiality and privacy, accommodations and support services, grievance and disciplinary proceedings, training received by school personnel, and school personnel roles and responsibilities.
- **Schools should distribute a written copy of the policy to all students, parents and guardians, and school personnel** at the beginning of each school year and post it on the school's official website. In addition, schools should distribute a copy of the written policy to student survivors as incidents are brought to the attention of school personnel. The policy must be available in multiple languages, as reflected in the student population.

- **Illinois K-12 schools are currently required to conduct training of school personnel once every two years.** At a minimum, this training must be conducted by domestic and sexual violence experts and include training on communicating with and listening to survivors, connecting survivors to appropriate in-school services and other agencies, programs, and services, and implementing the school's policies, procedures and protocols regarding domestic and sexual violence survivors. Schools must comply with this law — the first step in ensuring confidentiality is prioritized, school personnel are equipped to empathetically support student survivors, and the revictimization of survivors is eliminated.
- **Additional training for school personnel is recommended, particularly for social workers and counselors.** State law outlines certified training that is provided by domestic and sexual violence service providers.
- **Each school should assign staff as liaisons, or go-to persons for students, parents and guardians, school personnel, and service providers so at minimum, everyone knows the first point of contact to ensure that student survivors receive the support they need.** Liaisons are responsible for the proper implementation of school policies and protocols. The number of staff needed for this role will depend on other responsibilities of the liaisons and the size of the school. Optimally, each school would have at least one staff liaison that has received a 40-Hour Domestic Violence training certification as provided under state law and one staff liaison who has received a 40-Hour Sexual Assault training certification. With at least two school personnel trained, students may disclose to whomever they feel most comfortable — it is valuable for students to have options when disclosing a traumatizing experience.



# Confidentiality

**“When I was in 8th grade I went through a lot that year...I went to my counselor and it was like, I thought she was supposed to keep that stuff secret. And literally the next day... Like all the teachers were like, you’re scaring us, we wanna talk to you. Like that really made me uncomfortable and made me mad.”** — Student

Ensuring confidentiality and respecting the privacy of student survivors of domestic and sexual violence keeps survivors safe and supported. Confidentiality and privacy encourages survivors to report the violence and to seek out the necessary support to stay in school, stay safe, succeed academically, and complete their education.

When confidentiality is not valued, or when it is unclear who to report to and who is trained to confidentially assist student survivors, not only is confidentiality broken, but time is wasted in getting survivors the support they urgently need, and revictimization is likely to occur.

## Findings

A majority of students reported that any information disclosed to school personnel was unlikely to remain confidential. This belief was shared among service providers as well. One service provider explained that most school personnel did not understand the importance of privacy for students when disclosing traumatic experiences, so that even minor steps to maintain confidentiality, such as finding a private room to speak to survivors, were rarely taken.

Study participants shared stories of breeched confidentiality and blatant disregard of privacy concerns. Often, student survivors and parents and guardians do not know who to confidently disclose to, and school personnel do not know who is best suited to support the student survivor. It is common for students to first confide in a teacher or other faculty member that they trust, but that does not guarantee confidentiality.

One student survivor (Brenda) reported that the teacher she first told about her sexual assault brought the incident to the guidance counselor's attention, who then informed the school social worker, who, finally, turned out to be the person best suited to advocate for the student. Many participants said that school personnel inappropriately shared survivors' stories among themselves, and one student (Lora) was constantly questioned by other school personnel about the violence she had experienced. Another student survivor shared that local media attention to her sexual assault led teachers to discuss her case openly in their classrooms, with some blaming her for the assault. In a similar case, a student survivor shared that school personnel widely shared what happened to her in ways that included "slut shaming" her. Still another student reported that after she disclosed her experience with domestic violence to school personnel, her identity was shared, and details were recounted over the school intercom for the purposes of offering the student the school's "best wishes." In the case of another student (April) who had been abducted and repeatedly raped, the lack of confidentiality created a hostile environment not only for that student, but also for those who came forward after witnessing her abduction and other student survivors. Multiple accounts about survivors' experiences with peer bullying after disclosures to school personnel indicate that breaches of confidentiality plague survivors.

A common problem identified by service provider participants is inadequate space to meet with students to assure privacy. They indicate that this problem exists for school personnel and serves as a barrier to creating partnerships between schools and community-based organizations that could provide services to survivors.



Contacting parents and guardians once school personnel become aware that a student has experienced domestic or sexual violence may seem to be the logical action to take, but it may not always be the right thing to do. Making that call without the student's consent may run the risk of further jeopardizing the student's safety. For one survivor, (Rachel), the thought of telling her parents about the violence she experienced terrified her, but the school dean threatened to withhold any assistance unless she did; and if she did not tell her parents, he would. For another student (Denise), informing her father about her self-harm could have caused further harm, as the behavior was a result of abuse she was suffering at the hands of her father. If it hadn't been for a community-based service provider's intervention, the school would have contacted the abuser, further endangering the student.

Whether and when parents and guardians are contacted should not be a knee-jerk reaction, but instead, one of thoughtful consideration — and in consultation with experts. Of course, the age of the student is a factor. Under [Illinois law](#), minors twelve years of age and older may receive outpatient counseling or psychotherapy for up to eight, 90-minute sessions before requiring consent from a parent. At the end of the eight sessions, parental consent is required to proceed with counseling sessions unless the therapist cannot get in contact with a parent or determines that parental notification would compromise the well-being of the child. Parental consent is not required for minors age 17. The availability of counseling without parental consent is a valuable resource for student survivors who need the support of an adult but are not ready to disclose an experience of domestic or sexual violence to a parent or who experience abuse at the hands of a parent. Often, these counseling sessions are used for student survivors to work through how to inform their parents of the violence they have experienced.

Survivors have legitimate reasons to exclude law enforcement from their quest to heal. It is important for school personnel to understand that reporting an incident to the police, pressing charges, or pursuing a criminal investigation may not be the safest, healthiest, or most effective avenue for survivors to take. There are instances in which police involvement is the right thing to do—one survivor (Mary), was sexually assaulted at school. However, domestic and sexual violence exists and is traumatic whether or not the police have been notified, the violence is the subject of a criminal investigation, the perpetrator has been criminally charged or convicted of a crime, or a court order of protection has been issued by a court.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations related to confidentiality are intended to provide a baseline for schools to ensure student survivors stay in school, stay safe, succeed academically, and complete their education.

- **As part of the survivor-centered, trauma-informed written policy, the importance of confidentiality should be explained, and protocols developed to ensure student confidentiality, including protocols for the reporting of domestic and sexual violence to school personnel.** The policy should clearly:
  - Identify the school liaisons or “go-to” people assigned to handle reports of domestic and sexual violence and which school personnel are confidential sources who will protect the privacy of the student.
  - Clarify survivors’ rights to confidentiality and privacy, and limitations on confidentiality, including school personnel obligations for [mandated reporting](#) and the involvement of law enforcement.
  - Include information about confidentiality that should be relayed to students both orally and in writing upon initial disclosure.
  - Provide for distribution of the policy to all students, parents and guardians, and school personnel at the beginning of each school year and to individual students as incidents arise. The policy must be available in multiple languages, as reflected in the student populations. This will aid students in making informed decisions about whether and to whom to disclose.
  - Provide for additional outreach through trainings, bulletins, emails, the school webpage, and other communication means.

- **To ensure privacy, each school should have a private space for staff liaisons and other school personnel, community-based service providers, and anyone else included in a survivor’s recovery to meet with survivors.** The staff liaison should schedule meetings with advocates at a time most convenient for and most respectful of the confidentiality of the survivor.
- **At the minimum, schools should partner with service providers in the community** so that expert advocates can help school personnel support the student and ensure the school’s approach is survivor-centered and trauma-informed.
- **School personnel working with students should all receive survivor-centered, trauma-informed training that, among other topics, explains the importance of** and provides best practices for maintaining survivor confidentiality and privacy.



# Accommodations and Support Services

**When a student’s mother found out the perpetrator was allowed in the same class as her daughter, she contacted the dean who told her, “The conflict between the two of them really should be over by now.”** — Service provider

Student survivors of domestic and sexual violence often need academic-, safety-, and/or health-related accommodations and support services in their quest to heal and keep up with their school work. When grades falter or attendance drops off as students deal with the violence, school personnel are uniquely positioned to assist them. Changing class schedules, allowing for more time to complete assignments, letting missed work be made up, permitting survivors to leave class when they feel triggered, and arranging counseling and other support services in a private place at a convenient time are just some of the ways schools can ensure student survivors stay in school, stay safe, succeed academically, and complete their education without placing undue burden on the survivor.

## Findings

Our study participants described accommodations for survivors as either inadequate, inappropriate, or nonexistent. Instead, the burden to ensure survivors receive the support they need often fell on the survivors or their parents or guardians. Receiving



accommodations and support services should not depend on who the student happens to talk to, or rely upon an individual staff member's goodness or knowledge. Receipt of appropriate accommodations and support services should happen as a matter of course — not based on luck of the draw.

Most in-school accommodations and support described by student survivors and service providers were inadequate, inappropriate, or nonexistent. Failure to act in response to a disclosure of domestic or sexual violence further harms student survivors by perpetuating feelings of isolation and helplessness and may put the survivor at risk of further harm. For one student (Sarah), confiding in the school guidance counselor about her rape did not elicit any support or offer of accommodations. For another student survivor (Rachel), disclosing about an experience of domestic violence prompted the school's dean to withhold any assistance unless she told her parents. In both instances, the inaction of the school left the students feeling alone and vulnerable. Two other student survivors' parents (Lucia and Denise) first language was not English, making communication with school personnel difficult and frustrating their attempts to ensure their children's well-being — no translator was provided for these families, creating a barrier to accessing accommodations and support.

Even when schools offer accommodations and support services, without a written policy, clear protocols in place, and training of school personnel, schools risk hindering a students' recovery and jeopardizing their safety. In the case of one survivor of sexual harassment (Nicole), though the school took the initial step of changing the perpetrator's schedule, school personnel would not guarantee that her schedule would be protected from him in future years. Because the effects of domestic and sexual violence can be long lasting, a long-term plan is an important step in a survivor's recovery. For another survivor of sexual violence (Marco), the school did not become aware of the violence, even though it was happening at school, until the survivor's mother brought it to their attention. The school response was inadequate even after the mother made continued requests for action. Meaningful action from the school came only after a meeting with his parents and a community-based service provider. The student survivor then received academic accommodations, including additional time to make up school work and submit assignments online when he felt unable to attend class. The school also assigned a staff member to wait with the survivor after school to prevent further violence by the perpetrator and help to enforce a court-ordered stalking no-contact order. The school also assigned a staff member to sit in an office with him during lunch to prevent peer bullying because of the sexual violence, which, while maintaining his safety, perpetuated his feelings of isolation.

While students and service providers often reported inadequate accommodations and inaction by schools, there were also reports of schools handling disclosures of domestic and sexual violence appropriately and offering survivor-centered, trauma-informed accommodations and support. For example, when a survivor of sexual assault (Juana) reached out to her guidance counselor about the incident, the counselor collaborated with other school personnel to ensure she received appropriate accommodations—including time extensions on course work, support in a school group for students working through trauma, and permission to leave class on an as-needed basis if she needed to speak with her guidance counselor or social worker. Another young student (Cindy) did not receive any assistance until she was being evaluated for the special education program, when she disclosed that she had witnessed her mother stab a man in their home. Once disclosed, school personnel followed the mandated reporting protocol to the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, provided her with emergency counseling and individualized attention and support.

The schools attended by two other student survivors (Samantha and Anne) reached out to experts outside their school — community-based service providers and personnel at other schools within their school district — to provide needed accommodations and support services, and informed their parents in a way that involved them in their children’s healing in a positive way. Survivor-centered, trauma-informed accommodations and support services preserve the confidentiality and privacy of the student survivor while getting them the support they need to heal, maintain their safety, and keep up with their academics.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations related to accommodations and support services are intended to provide a baseline for schools to ensure student survivors stay in school, stay safe, succeed academically, and complete their education by offering appropriate and timely academic-, safety-, and health-related accommodations and support services.

- **Schools should work with domestic and sexual violence experts to develop a list of possible academic-, safety-, and health-related in-school accommodations the school can provide**, including those related to before- and after-school programs and events, and routes and transportation to and from school.

- **Schools should build and maintain relationships with community-based domestic and sexual violence service providers and other social service providers,** develop with those providers a list of organizations for referral purposes, and develop an effective referral protocol.
- **Schools should provide students with notification of the right for minors age twelve through 16 to receive at least eight free, 90-minute counseling sessions without the consent of a parent or guardian** and should develop with domestic and sexual violence community-based service providers a list of providers of these services. Minors age 17 do not need parental consent to receive these services.
- **Schools should connect student survivors to community-based service providers and implement necessary in-school accommodations.**
- **All academic accommodations and support services should be arranged placing the least burden on the survivor.** For example, if a student survivor has class with a perpetrator, the survivor should have the choice of who should transfer to another class.
- **All academic accommodations and support services should be arranged in a way that best maintains the confidentiality and privacy of student survivors.** For example, if a student survivor asks to meet with a domestic or sexual violence advocate, the school should arrange this meeting in a private space at a time that does not disrupt the student's schedule.
- **Schools must comply with all domestic and sexual violence safety plans and court-issued protective orders.**



# Revictimization

**“Well you know, boys will be boys, and if you didn’t want that to happen you shouldn’t have gone that way.”** — School dean to a student after the student had been groped in class

Survivors are often revictimized by school personnel, their peers, or law enforcement when they report an experience of domestic or sexual violence. When a student survivor seeks the support of school personnel, the survivor should feel that their voice is heard. School personnel should act in a way that demonstrates they believe survivors, not blame or shame them for the violence they have experienced., and act to prevent revictimization of the survivor by others.

## Findings

It takes courage for a survivor of domestic or sexual violence to tell her story and ask for help. Many survivors have feelings of isolation, shame, and helplessness because of the violence they have experienced, and too often school personnel react inappropriately and revictimize survivors. Student survivors also endure revictimization at the hands of their peers when their experience becomes the subject of gossip and bullying.

While participants relayed examples of schools responding to disclosures of domestic or sexual violence by believing the survivor and offering accommodations and support, too many stories detailed revictimization by school personnel. A school’s reaction to a student’s disclosure of domestic or sexual violence is often revictimizing for the student, perpetuating feelings of helplessness, isolation, and being unsafe. When schools do not actively support a student survivor following a disclosure of domestic or sexual violence, they send a clear message to the



survivor that they do not deserve support and that their well-being and safety is not a priority.

Participants reported that some school personnel do not offer accommodations or support to student survivors because they do not believe them. In one case, the school initially failed to believe the sexual harassment and assault a student (Marco) had consistently experienced at school. The abuse persisted until the survivor's parents and an advocate from a community-based sexual violence service provider met with school administrators and a plan was developed to end the violence. School personnel's failure to believe survivors and the resulting inaction revictimizes survivors, allows the violence to continue, and contributes to the deterioration of the survivor's health. Simply believing the survivor goes a long way in preventing revictimization and sets a course of action free from school personnel's personal biases.

Participants also reported feeling revictimized when school officials place the blame for the violence on the survivor. When one student (Nicole) told her teacher that a classmate was verbally and sexually harassing her, touching her inappropriately, and exposing himself to her, the teacher dismissed her and "blamed [Nicole] for her perception of the event, rather than blaming the perpetrator..." Another principal told a student survivor that her assault was "her fault because she was still [in a relationship] with [the perpetrator]."

Similar to blaming survivors for the domestic or sexual violence they suffered, school personnel often shame and punish survivors. For a high school student (Lora) who was sexually assaulted by an adult in her home, some school personnel seemed more concerned by her increased sexual behavior after the assault than by the sexual assault she experienced. Another student survivor (Brenda) believed she was targeted for dress code violations after she complained about the dean's unempathetic response.

Responses by school personnel of disbelief, survivor-blaming, and shaming are indicative of a shameful ignorance of domestic and sexual violence and disregard of the myriad consequences survivors endure.

Many student survivors are revictimized by the bullying of peers. Unfortunately, in almost every case where bullying occurred, the school did little to nothing to address the problem. In one situation (Marco), the school's solution to bullying was to require the student to eat his lunch in an administration office and away from classmates in the lunchroom, contributing to his social isolation. Another student (April) was bullied and blamed by classmates and community members when her sexual assault was discussed on local news. The school's inappropriate reaction to the news and

open discussion of the details perpetuated the bullying and created a triggering environment, including the revictimization of other student survivors working through trauma. Eventually, the student dropped out when the accommodations the school provided were inadequate. In one survivor's case, although the subsequent bullying was severe enough to lead to suicidal ideation and hospitalization, the school did nothing to address the bullying in a concrete way. Peer bullying associated with survivors coming forward about domestic or sexual violence is a real problem that must be addressed by school personnel.

It is worth noting that several student survivors mentioned revictimization by police. One student (Juana) decided not to report her sexual assault to the police because she did not want to endure the revictimization commonly endured by survivors pursuing legal action. Another student (April) who decided, with the support of her mother and school, to file a report about her abduction and sexual assault experienced revictimization at the hands of law enforcement directly. She was met with disbelief, which made her no longer trust the police and reach out to a gang for protection instead.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations related to revictimization are intended to provide a baseline for schools to ensure student survivors stay in school, stay safe, succeed academically, and complete their education by preventing revictimization.

- **In collaboration with domestic and sexual violence experts, schools should develop best practices for school personnel when a student discloses an experience of domestic or sexual violence** or school personnel otherwise become aware of such violence, and for subsequent interactions and decisions.
- **School personnel should make sure students know they are believed**, that the violence they have experienced is not their fault, and that the school will assist them so that they are safe and will be okay.
- **Schools should anticipate and intervene when bullying occurs.**
- **Schools should work with law enforcement and experts on domestic and sexual violence to prevent revictimization.**

# Time for Change

**All students deserve an opportunity to succeed in school.** Students who are survivors of domestic or sexual violence face particular barriers to success and frequently struggle with declining academic performance and attendance. Too often, the burden falls on survivors and their families to obtain the support and resources that schools should provide, with some students having no option but to turn to home schooling, transfer to another school, or even dropout.

**Regardless of its location, size, or available resources, every Illinois school can and should develop a written policy for responding to the needs of students who are survivors of domestic or sexual violence.** These policies should be publicized widely so that all students, parents and guardians, and school personnel are aware of them, and all school personnel should be trained to ensure the policy is implemented properly.

In light of the Trump Administration's attack on Title IX, particularly the evisceration of the protections afforded by the law for survivors of domestic and sexual violence, these policies and practices are particularly important. The federal government's retreat from its role makes the state's role in protecting student survivors even more important.

**Educators and other school personnel, school board members, legislators, service providers, advocates, students, and parents and guardians must work together to develop and promote ways in which school personnel can help survivors cope with and lessen the impact of trauma caused by domestic and sexual violence.** Only then will student survivors be empowered to stay in school, stay safe, succeed academically, and complete their educations.

## Appendix A: Key Terms

**Revictimization** = victimization of a survivor of domestic or sexual violence by blaming or shaming them for the violence, not believing the survivor when they disclose, or not acting to support the survivor

**Survivor-centered** = an approach that rebuilds a survivor's sense of control and empowerment by focusing on their needs, as determined by the survivor, and ensuring a sensitive delivery of services, an understanding of the impacts of trauma, maintaining the confidentiality, safety, and privacy of the survivor, without assigning blame or fault to the survivor for their experience of violence

**Trauma-informed** = rooted in an understanding of the effects of trauma on a survivor's brain and behavior while they process the trauma

**Triggered** = a negative emotional response based on a past trauma



## Appendix B: Vignettes of School-Aged Survivor Experiences

In addition to what we learned from participants through focus groups, the following narrative accounts come from phone and in-person interviews with student survivors and service providers. The student survivors, whose names have been changed below to protect confidentiality, are diverse in age, race and ethnicity, gender, and geographic location and include LGBTQ and immigrant youth. These accounts provide details of some of the examples provided throughout this report.

All interviewees signed consent forms provided by the researchers that explained the purpose of the study, the procedures to be followed for confidentiality and data security, contact information for all the researchers, the purpose and potential benefits of the study, the minimal risks of the study, and the notice that they could withdraw from the study at any point. Names of the interviewees were removed from transcripts and other files to ensure confidentiality in reporting and anonymity of their data. We are grateful to all of the student survivors who shared their stories in the hope that this report can lead to change.

### Student Survivor Stories

#### **Sarah**

Following her family's immigration from Eastern Europe, Sarah attended a large public high school in a southwest suburb of Chicago. During her junior year, she had her first sexual experience with her boyfriend of ten months. About two weeks later, her boyfriend sexually assaulted her by pushing her to perform a sexual act to which she had not consented. After telling him "no" several times, he did not stop. Traumatized by this experience, Sarah developed eating disorders, suffered from anxiety and suicidal thoughts, and withdrew socially. Because of the severity of her eating disorder, Sarah's friends encouraged her to reach out to her high school guidance counselor, who paid minimal attention to these issues in connection to her rape. Because seeking help was not a positive experience for Sarah, she stopped seeing the counselor and questioned her decision to ask for support. No school personnel provided any further support.

Even in college, Sarah struggles with anxiety related to the assault. Sarah thinks that her experience as a survivor of sexual assault highlights the need for quality sex education and training of school personnel to properly address and support survivors' needs.

### **Brenda**

Brenda is a 20-year-old white survivor of sexual assault. She attended a well-funded school in a rural town northwest of Chicago. As a 16-year-old sophomore, a senior student tried to put his arms around her after school. Feeling uncomfortable, Brenda pushed him away and walked to her car. The senior got into the back of her car and forced himself on her. Although she was fearful, she managed to get away. With her friends' encouragement, Brenda disclosed the incident to a teacher, who brought it to the guidance counselor's attention. The counselor redirected her teacher to the school social worker, who was better suited to address the situation.

Though she attended a well-funded school, Brenda was inadequately supported, and her mother, who was a social worker, had to advocate for her needs by finding her a private therapist and requesting a meeting with the principal, the guidance counselor, the dean, and the police. School administrators acknowledged the situation as a sexual assault and gave Brenda a few options — one of which was to file a police report. She decided that she would not press charges against the perpetrator. The dean talked to the perpetrator about his misconduct and banned him from the sophomore hallway. Although it was agreed the perpetrator would be kept out of Brenda's classes, he ended up in one. Brenda's mother contacted the dean, only to be told "the conflict between the two of them really should be over by now." After that, her mother contacted the principal, who suggested Brenda be transferred out of the school. Thinking that it was unfair for Brenda to have to transfer as the survivor of the assault, Brenda's mother finally got the school to install a male aid in the classroom to make sure the perpetrator did not harass Brenda in the class they had together.

The teacher offered Brenda extensions on assignments and finally had the perpetrator removed from the class altogether when she noticed his presence continued to trigger her. The school police officer had to intervene when Brenda was bullied by the perpetrator's friends. She continued to have panic attacks, PTSD symptoms, and her grades dropped. Brenda further lost faith in the school's ability to support her when she felt targeted by the dean for dress code violations after her mother contacted the superintendent's office to report the dean's insensitivity. If it had not been for her mother, Brenda would have received an even less adequate response from her school.

### **Juana**

Juana, a Latina woman who attended a predominantly Latino high school on the north side of Chicago, had witnessed domestic violence in her parents' relationship since she was seven years old. When she was 17 years old, she was at home

with her brother, cousin, and their friend. When her brother and cousin left, their friend stayed and physically restrained and sexually assaulted her. Juana's mother encouraged her to press charges against her attacker. She decided not to because she feared having to relive the incident in court.

Juana's brother blamed her for the attack, and she internalized negative feelings towards herself leading her to four depression- and PTSD-related hospitalizations. At school, Juana could not focus, and her school performance suffered. Though hesitant, Juana reached out to her guidance counselor who, in collaboration with the school social worker, provided emotional support and advocated for Juana by having teachers accommodate her needs — extensions on course work, support in a school group for students recovering from trauma, and permission to step out of class as needed.

School staff was consistently available for Juana, even when she felt she did not need support. When she distanced herself and missed regular check ins, they would find her in class. Juana was also connected with a therapist by the school. Sexual assault awareness was integrated into the classrooms, and school staff offered to address the issue of victim blaming with her brother, but Juana refused for fear of retaliation. The school encouraged her to return to the school if she needed further support following graduation. Juana hopes other schools assign staff to serve as domestic and sexual violence advisors to students.

### **Rachel**

Rachel, a white woman from the southern suburbs of Chicago, had been an active student at school, involved in varsity basketball, softball, and tennis. When she was a senior, she experienced domestic violence from her boyfriend of three years, a recent graduate of her large high school with considerable resources. On one occasion, the neighbors called the police, reporting a domestic disturbance. When a responding officer approached Rachel, in shock, she told the officer that nothing had happened. On another occasion, she had been choked by her boyfriend.

Rachel's coach noticed bruises on her neck and contacted the dean, who gave her an ultimatum, rather than support. He told her she had 24 hours to disclose the incident to her parents before the school did. Rachel was terrified of telling her parents, although they were supportive of her after she did tell them of the incident. The school was not supportive. Rachel was not provided counseling through the school and instead had to seek out external counseling with the help of her parents. She was not provided any academic accommodations and was left feeling alone and to blame.

Her parents suggested obtaining a restraining order, but Rachel was advised against taking this course of action by a security guard at her school who falsely told her she could face legal penalty for lying to the police when they responded to the domestic disturbance call. Rachel hopes school administrators offer more accommodations and accurate information to keep survivors safe. She also hopes policymakers can do more to prevent her experience from happening to other student survivors of domestic violence.

## Service Provider Stories

### Lina

When Lina, a white student from a suburb of Springfield, Illinois, was 14 years old, she was sexually assaulted by a classmate at a neighborhood park. Both students attended a public suburban high school: a “prep” school with strong academics and athletics programs. After the assault, Lina’s grades plummeted, and she had suicidal ideations for which she was later hospitalized.

Upon learning of her daughter’s assault, Lina’s mother contacted the school and the police. A legal advocate from a sexual assault advocacy center met with the school several times regarding a court ordered civil no-contact order that Lina had obtained to protect herself from the perpetrator. The school’s social worker and a teacher were supportive of Lina. Her schedule was changed to avoid confrontation with the perpetrator, and she was permitted to leave class on an as-needed basis to talk with the social worker when she felt triggered, which was very helpful. For additional support, a therapist at an external sexual assault advocacy center offered Lina counseling. However, Lina was continuously bullied by friends of the perpetrator. Although the school threatened these students with disciplinary action, school personnel did not take further action to keep Lina safe from her harassers.

### Mary

Mary, a student at a large public high school on the northeast side of Chicago, was assaulted by an older student at her school. The assault was reported by student bystanders who saw the perpetrator force Mary into a secluded area against her will. Administrators immediately turned the incident over to the police. However, the school did not take any disciplinary action against the perpetrator. After the attack, several staff members questioned why the perpetrator did not receive any disciplinary repercussions, but the administration was not responsive. With the help of her parents, Mary subsequently transferred schools soon after the attack.

### **Nicole**

Nicole, an Asian American student at a small public high school on the north side of Chicago, was verbally and sexually harassed and assaulted by a classmate her freshman year. This classmate inappropriately touched Nicole and exposed himself to her. After multiple instances against her and other classmates, Nicole reported the perpetrator to her teacher. The teacher was dismissive and, according to an advocate who worked with the school, “blamed [Nicole] for her perception of the event, rather than blaming the perpetrator for making inappropriate gestures and statements.”

Then Nicole told her school counselor, who brought it to the attention of the school administration. The perpetrator’s schedule was changed so Nicole would not have to take classes with him, but only for one year. Nicole feared seeing the perpetrator at school outside of the classroom. She also faced bullying from other students who blamed her after hearing about the incident. With the support of the counselor who advocated for her, Nicole continues to work through the issues that arose from the harassment and the school’s neglect of its responsibilities. Nicole’s counselor is also trying to connect her to a girls’ group for additional support.

### **Marco**

Marco, a 14-year-old Latino survivor of sexual assault, attends an elementary school on Chicago’s north side. One of Marco’s peers showed him pornography on his phone and began inappropriately touching and spanking Marco. Other classmates also began joining in with physical and verbal assaults — bullying Marco during and after school. As a result, Marco stopped attending class, which caused his grades to plummet. Despite his involvement in counseling, Marco experienced depression and suicidal ideations, resulting in his hospitalization.

The school learned of the violence and bullying when Marco’s mother brought it to their attention near the end of the academic year. The perpetrator was suspended for two days, but no further action was taken by the school, even after Marco’s hospitalization. The school deferred to the police to handle the investigation and allowed the perpetrator to remain in Marco’s classes until the perpetrator’s parents decided to transfer their son to another school. Ultimately, Marco’s mother quit her job to monitor Marco’s health and safety, especially after his hospitalization.

The school initially failed to believe the experiences Marco disclosed. Action from the school came only after Marco, his parents, and a rape advocacy organization met with school administrators to discuss a plan of action. As a result, Marco gained confidence to speak about his experiences and began to trust the school

administration. Also because of the joint efforts of the rape advocacy organization and Marco's parents, he was offered accommodations from the school — opportunities to make up missed work and submit assignments online when he felt unsafe attending school, a staff member to help enforce a court-ordered stalking no contact order when the perpetrator loitered around the school to taunt Marco, as well as a staff member assigned to sit in an administrative office with Marco during lunch. This final accommodation, unfortunately, led to further isolation.

### **Lucia**

Lucia is an eighth grader at a small school in northeast Chicago, where her family relocated when they migrated from Mexico. Lucia lived with her abusive father who was violent toward Lucia and her mother until his incarceration on unrelated charges. The school counselor first learned of the abuse after a friend reported that Lucia was cutting herself. The counselor also noticed Lucia's grades had dropped significantly because she was unable to focus in school and was experiencing suicidal ideations and depression, ultimately resulting in hospitalization.

Following her hospitalization, the school connected Lucia to an organization that supports domestic violence survivors in weekly group meetings within the school. At the time, the only long-term plan in place for Lucia was to take antidepressants. Although the youth group met once a week and focused on prevention and education around gender-based violence, it did not fully meet Lucia's needs. An advocate from the organization shared: "Each week [Lucia] kind of shut down more and more. She really needed more comprehensive services that weren't being provided." Lucia's friends also noticed her condition worsened and her behavior changed after the hospitalization. The advocate believed that assigning someone within the school to be a support system for Lucia was a crucial, but missing component.

Although Lucia's mother tried to support her and wanted to advocate for Lucia to get the support she needed, she was unable to communicate with the school due to language barriers. Translators are required by the Chicago Public Schools, but the school did not have a translator and did not try to find one. Thus, Lucia's mother was unable to adequately voice her concerns regarding her daughter's unmet needs.

### **April**

April, an African American student on the west side of Chicago, experienced sexual assault when she was a freshman in high school. On her way to school, April was abducted by a group of men in a van. They took her to an abandoned building and took turns sexually assaulting her. After the attacks, she went home to tell her



mother what happened. The school principal accompanied April and her mother to the police station to file a report, but the police did not believe her. Desperate for protection, April approached a local gang.

News of the attack quickly spread through the school because of local media coverage and the gossip of student bystanders to the abduction. The school inappropriately reacted to the news — teachers were speaking to other students about the assault, and many survivors of past sexual assault became triggered. April was bullied in school and in the community by people who did not believe her or who blamed her for the attack.

That fall, April received homeschooling and counseling services provided by the school as part of a transitional period. The goal was for April to return to school, but she never did. Because school resources were limited, April received in-home counseling only once every two weeks, and she dropped out before her sophomore year. Additionally, there was no protocol for teachers and staff to follow once they learned of the attack. A service provider who worked with the school described “a sense of lost-ness” within the school and believed that a lack of training and the normalization of gender-based violence contributed to the school’s failure to support April.

### **Lora**

Lora, a 16-year-old Latina student who attended a charter high school on Chicago’s west side, was sexually assaulted by her mother’s live-in boyfriend. After the assault, Lora became a completely different student. She went from being a straight “A” student to skipping and failing classes and grew increasingly involved in risky sexual behavior. Lora was hospitalized for attempting suicide due to the trauma and continued bullying she experienced at school.

Lora reported her assault to her gym teacher, who then shared the information with the school social worker. At that time, the social worker had already received messages from several of Lora’s friends who noticed something was wrong. Lora began meeting with the social worker weekly. The social worker followed up with Lora often and, working in conjunction with the school counselor, actively advocated for her. The social worker filed a Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) report, and the perpetrator was kicked out of Lora’s home. Within the same year that the DCFS report was filed, the perpetrator moved back into her home. The social worker continued to collaborate with Lora’s mother, however, nothing reportedly happened to the perpetrator as a result of the assault.

Lora received mixed support from teachers and school staff. She was allowed to make up for her missed assignments, and the dean of students addressed some of the cyberbullying that she received from other students. However, Lora experienced a grave lack of privacy. Lora's social worker noted that she was constantly questioned by other faculty for information about her abuse. School staff's focus seemed to be on Lora's increased sexual behavior after the assault instead of on how best to support her recovery.

### **Anne**

Anne, a 16-year-old African American student living with her father, had suffered emotional abuse perpetrated by her mother. Anne's mother made her witness violence among her siblings as a spectacle. Anne had been a high achieving student in Advanced Placement classes and a member of her school's track team when she made her first suicide attempt in her sophomore year. This became public knowledge when she attempted suicide. According to an advocate from a domestic violence organization, "it was a big surprise to the school that this happened to this student." Following the request of the assistant principal and Anne's academic advisor, the school principal referred Anne to a domestic violence organization, where a counselor learned this was not Anne's first suicide attempt.

Anne's school reached out to her father with options on how to address the situation and connected Anne to two community organizations, where she became involved in weekly individual counseling with the goal of joining group counseling in the future. The school worked around her class schedule, so Anne could meet with therapists during her lunch. The advocate that worked with Anne believes that Anne's school lacked communication with Anne's mother, although they made efforts to support Anne during her recovery.

### **Denise**

Denise, an 11-year-old Latina middle school student, attended a diverse school on the north side of Chicago. Denise's parents, who did not speak English, had a difficult time communicating with the school.

One of Denise's teachers noticed that she had cuts on her arm and sent her to the counselor's office where she disclosed that she felt lonely at home and avoided interacting with her parents. The domestic violence advocate present at the meeting sensed that there was something more going on at home and intervened when the school intended to contact Denise's father. In conversation with Denise's mother, the school counselor and advocate soon discovered Denise's father was abusive.

The advocate connected Denise’s mother with counseling resources and helped the school respond to the specific needs of Denise and her family. According to the advocate, “teachers aren’t ready or trained to support a student who is cutting, a lot of them don’t know the proper approach, but [the school] took it seriously, and I think that’s really valuable.”

Unfortunately, had the outside advocate not been present when Denise met with the school counselor, the school would have proceeded with its normal protocol and called Denise’s father, the perpetrator. The advocate also believed that this school lacked a “sense of privacy or safety,” referring to the crowded counselor’s office where conversation could easily be overheard.

### **Erin**

Erin, an African American kindergarten student, attended a public school in Chicago. Teachers noticed that Erin came to school in unwashed clothes acting “weepy,” and that she had a negative emotional state that interfered with her ability to focus in class and do schoolwork. One day Erin came to school very upset, and her teacher asked her what was wrong. Erin disclosed that her mother had hit and physically injured her father. The teacher then approached an advocate hired by the elementary school to support survivors of violence.

The advocate and Erin’s teacher met with Erin and created a plan focused on her immediate and long-term needs. They assured Erin that she could come to them if she needed help and take alone time outside of the classroom to calm down. This support made Erin feel safe in the school environment and kept her in school. To the advocate’s knowledge, the school tried to reach out to the mother, but was unsuccessful in reaching her.

Later in the year, Erin failed to attend school for multiple days. The school reached out to her family again, and the principal made a home visit to make sure Erin was safe. The close teacher-student relationships at Erin’s school were essential to her disclosing what had happened, allowing open communication of her needs and follow-up to make sure there was no future harm. The advocate believed that trusting relationships at school was of utmost importance, along with protocols that inform teachers who report to and what steps to take to support a student who discloses an experience of domestic or sexual violence.

### **Samantha**

Samantha attended a large public high school in a southern suburb of Chicago, where she grew up in a white, middle-class family. During her freshman year, at the age of 15, Samantha was raped several times by perpetrators the same age as her. She suffered severe emotional trauma, depression, and low self-esteem as a result. She skipped class often, cried uncontrollably throughout the day, and exuded a tough exterior by carrying weapons with her in the community. The school was unaware of Samantha's experience and did not immediately recognize the signs that Samantha was under distress, until she disclosed to a school healthcare provider over a year later. The school arranged a meeting for Samantha to tell them what had happened to her. Her parents were supportive and involved in her process of healing, which included school-provided counseling services during the day.

However, seeing little improvement, the school acknowledged that its ability to help Samantha was limited. At the start of her senior year, when the school realized she needed more support, Samantha was moved into a smaller therapeutic school meant to better support students who displayed emotional, developmental, and behavioral concerns. Samantha's teacher helped her make up missed assignments in a one-on-one teaching setting and connected her with resources in the community to ensure her support extended beyond school.

Although Samantha's original high school did not immediately recognize the signs that Samantha was under distress, school personnel referred her to a more intensive teaching environment once they recognized their limitations in helping Samantha succeed in school. According to an advocate that worked with Samantha, heavy family involvement can be a major key in easing the trauma for some survivors, in addition to having support systems for students in place. Working with parents in terms of coping strategies can have positive consequences on survivors' experiences.

### **Cindy**

Cindy, an African American kindergarten student, attended a resource-poor charter school in a predominantly African American neighborhood in the Chicagoland area. She often came to school without a backpack or school materials, did not complete her homework, and frequently misbehaved. Cindy's mother wrote a letter to the school requesting that she be enrolled in the special education program. The school evaluated Cindy for the program and discovered during that evaluation that she had witnessed her mother stab a man in their home. Cindy's sister went to the same school as Cindy and had reported to the school what she had seen a year before Cindy had begun school and been evaluated for the special education program.

Administrators filed a report with DCFS and later linked this case with an open case involving Cindy's sister, a minor also living in the home. Cindy's special education teacher provided individualized attention and support to ensure she was completing her schoolwork. The school also arranged for emergency counseling, although school personnel could not continue with more long-term counseling without the consent of Cindy's mother, who was unresponsive. Little is known about whether Cindy and her sister are succeeding in school because the family moved out of the school district and has not been responsive to follow-ups.

### **Jessie**

Jessie, a 16-year-old, white, transgender male attended high school in rural Illinois. He grew up in a single-parent household with his mother until she remarried a man that was verbally and physically abusive towards Jessie. He intimidated Jessie by throwing objects at him, but his mother defended her husband and accused Jessie of not doing what he was told. Tired of the abuse, Jessie approached his guidance counselor at school, who connected him with a community service provider.

Jessie did not want to tell his mother he was seeing a counselor, but the number of counseling sessions without parental consent were limited under Illinois law at that time. Eventually, Jessie's mother was informed, and Jessie attended treatment for suicidal ideations. He received counseling and medication for one month until his mother stopped refilling the prescription and took him out of counseling. Jessie started failing classes and had to enroll in summer school to make up assignments.

Jessie was a member of an LGBTQ pride group at school and had a close friend with whom he could discuss personal hardships. Nonetheless, Jessie experienced bullying at school, which the administration did little to mitigate. However, the school arranged for Jessie to meet with an advocate at the the local domestic violence service provider. Eventually, he stopped coming to the community service provider to meet with the counselor, and no child abuse was reported to DCFS.

### **Claire**

Claire, an 18-year-old white woman, attended a rural high school with her boyfriend. They were living together with Claire's father when her boyfriend began sexually and physically abusing her. Claire's boyfriend was already facing charges for "sexting," or sending sexually explicit messages, to middle school girls.

Because of the abuse and the bullying she endured, Claire's high school arranged for her to complete assignments in the guidance counselor's office. Although there were no physical signs of abuse, Claire suffered significant emotional trauma and was ultimately sent to inpatient care following a suicide attempt. She was then connected to an advocate for survivors of physical and sexual assault. The advocate was Claire's only source of emotional support because her family was unsupportive. Though Claire's boyfriend was a student of the school, the administration did not confront him. He was tried in court as an adult for abusing Claire.





SHRIVER  
CENTER

Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law

67 E. Madison, Suite 2000 | Chicago, IL 60603 | 312.263.3830 | [info@povertylaw.org](mailto:info@povertylaw.org)  
[povertylaw.org](http://povertylaw.org)

  @shrivercenter

The Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law provides national leadership in advancing laws and policies that secure justice to improve the lives and opportunities of people living in poverty.