



Focus On: School Safety – Hazing

As high school students gather for school sponsored sports and activities, a comprehensive anti-hazing policy is a necessary tool to help administrators mitigate the risk of hazing among students in their care both on and off campus.

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The National Federation of High Schools (NFHS) defines hazing as "any humiliating or dangerous activity expected of a student to belong to a group, regardless of their willingness to participate."

While the act of hazing has primarily been linked to college fraternities and sororities, it is becoming a more frequent occurrence in high schools across the nation. Some experts note that hazing activities have been documented at the middle school level. Hazing is inherently problematic because the practice is noted to carry a "code of silence."

The practice of hazing is not new; however with the advent of social media, the degree to which hazing is reported in the news today has increased. While media coverage primarily focuses on hazing and athletics, it is important to note that hazing occurs within other school organizations and clubs, such as cheerleading, honor societies, band, choir and drama clubs. According to Dr. Susan Lipkins, PhD, founder of Insidehazing.com, "it is common for hazing to occur off campus, such as on buses, in hotels, at camps, and other locations as well as in locker rooms, on fields, and in secluded places throughout school grounds."

Hazing and sexual abuse

In the past, high school hazing and bullying typically involved name-calling, towel-snapping and pushing students into lockers. However, there are indications that sexually abusing fellow students has become a part of the hazing ritual. In scanning 2014 and 2015 media articles, several alleged hazing incidents that include sexual abuse have been reported in high schools in New Jersey, Ohio, Utah and Illinois. In 2012, Bloomberg News reviewed court documents and determined that more than 40 high school boys were sexually assaulted by their teammates compared with about three incidents a decade earlier.

Hazing and bullying

Hazing is a form of bullying, however hazing is regarded as a temporary event. The hazing ritual usually ends when the person or persons is/are permitted to join the group. The act of bullying is typically viewed as a continual event, as the bully or bullies repeatedly work to exclude a person or persons from a particular group. With hazing there is a perception of implied consent by the victim, whereas this is not the case with bullying. Both behaviors are prohibited in a school environment. School administrators who fail to provide a safe environment by preventing hazing and/or bullying can be held liable.

Risk management

School administrators are responsible for creating a climate of civility and respect in their schools.

Anti-hazing policy

A first step in managing this exposure is to develop and communicate anti-hazing policies and procedures to all school staff, parents and students. The anti-hazing policy needs to be incorporated into all student and staff handbooks. The policy should be distributed and signed by parents and students. During the first meeting of the school year for each athletic activity and/or student organization, a copy of the policy should be distributed to all attendees.

According to the NHFS, a model policy that prohibits hazing should include the following components:

Purpose – a statement that stipulates the goal of the policy, such as “to maintain a safe learning environment that is free from hazing for students and staff members.....hazing incidents are inconsistent with the goals of the school district and are prohibited at all times.”

General statement of policy – clearly defines that students, teachers, administrators, contract personnel or volunteers are prohibited from engaging, permitting, or condoning hazing on or off campus. The policy should also stipulate that all who engage in this prohibited activity will be disciplined.

Definition of hazing – describes what constitutes hazing. Hazing includes, but is not limited to the following:

- physical brutality – such as whipping, beating, striking, branding, tattooing, head-shaving, electronic shock or placing a harmful substance on the body; any type of coerced sexual behavior or sexual assault;
- physical activity - including sleep deprivation, exposure to weather, confinement to a restricted area,

extreme calisthenics or any other activity that subjects a student to an unreasonable risk of harm or that adversely affects the mental or physical health of a student;

- emotional abuse – including social isolation, abusive name calling, personal servitude, intimidation or humiliation;
- consumption of substances – any forced consumption of alcoholic beverages, drugs, tobacco products or other food or liquid;
- illegal activities – any activity that causes a student to perform a task that is in violation of state or federal law or school district policies or regulations (i.e. abductions, kidnappings, mistreatment of animals or other illegal activities.)

Reporting procedures – outlines who a student/parent should contact if they believe they have been a victim or their child has been a victim of hazing or have knowledge of any behavior which may constitute hazing. The procedure should mandate that all teachers, parents and students are required to report any incidents of hazing that may have occurred on or off school premises to appropriate personnel. The procedures should include a clearly defined process of anonymous reporting mechanisms that is available to all students, parents and members of the community.

School district action – mandates steps the school needs to take to investigate the incident as well as to protect the complainant. It should also include the appropriate actions the school may take upon completion of the investigation such as: warning, suspension, exclusion, expulsion, transfer, remediation, termination or discharge.

Reprisal – states the school district’s responsibility to take action against any student, teacher, administrator or other employee of the district and any contractor or volunteer who retaliates against anyone who reports a hazing incident. This section should include a definition of retaliation.

Standards for school staff

Administrators need to set standards for coaches and other staff members to model appropriate behavior.

Standards should include expected and prohibited staff member behavior in the policy such as:

- require all staff members to report a hazing incident;
- mandate frequent training for all staff and document participation;
- establish a culture of zero-tolerance for coaches and students regarding all hazing practices.

Create positive programs

Administrators and coaches need to offer appropriate activities such as movie night, laser tag, or a team retreat with adequate supervision to encourage team building among the students. Developing welcome programs for first-year and transfer students and assigning senior mentors to new students to discuss each person’s responsibility to prevent hazing and create a safe environment for all students are key steps to reduce the possibility of hazing incidents.

Warning signs that a student might be experiencing hazing

- Sudden change in behavior or attitude after joining the organization or team
- Wanting to leave the organization or team with no real explanation
- Sudden decrease in communication with friends and family
- Physical or psychological exhaustion
- Unexplained weight loss
- Unexplained injuries or illness
- Change in sleeping or eating habits
- Withdrawal from normal activities
- Expressed feeling of sadness or feeling of worthlessness
- Increase in secrecy and unwillingness to share details

Source: <http://hazingprevention.org/home/hazing/what-parents-need-to-know/>, August 2015

Exposure Checklist

- What is the school's policy on hazing? Does the school policy prohibit hazing on and off school property during and/or after school hours?
- What is the state law on anti-hazing?
- Is the school's anti-hazing policy included in the code of conduct? Have all parents/students signed the code of conduct before the students are allowed to participate in any sports or clubs?
- Have all administrators, teachers, coaches, and other school personnel been trained in how to report and handle a hazing incident? Is this training conducted regularly and documented?
- Is there an anonymous "tip line" in place to encourage students, parents and the community to report hazing incidents?
- Are all on-campus and off-campus activities properly supervised and/or monitored to prevent hazing incidents?
- Has a proper investigation taken place and are all the steps documented once a hazing incident has been reported?
- Are appropriate mechanisms in place to protect the person who reported the hazing as well as the victim(s)?
- Does the school offer appropriate activities to foster growth among students?