



Whether for an athletic team, marching band, or drama club, students sometimes engage in degrading and dangerous rituals just to belong. When the activity expected of someone joining or participating in a group humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers them, regardless of the participant's willingness, it is considered hazing.

A recent study analyzed more than 80 hazing claims reported between 2003 and 2012. Claims data collected during this nine-year period indicated that the average hazing claim cost \$91,000 to resolve. Although K-12 claims comprised only a quarter of the study, they were the most costly, accounting for 82% of the total losses incurred. One reason for the high expense is that many K-12 hazing claims involved allegations of sexual abuse, such as unwanted sexual touching, sexual simulations, or sexual assault. In fact, 64% of sexual hazing claims came from K-12 institutions and almost all involved boys' athletic teams.

Hazing is a complex problem that jeopardizes the learning environment and poses serious safety risks to students. Educational institutions must ensure that degrading and humiliating acts are not part of a student's initiation experience. With a strong anti-hazing policy, effective training, and continued responsiveness to potential hazing problems, institutions can help students create healthy rites of passage.

## STEPS TO PREVENT HAZING AT YOUR SCHOOLS

There are no easy solutions to prevent hazing, but educational institutions can follow these steps to establish a firm stance against the practice and create an environment where healthy initiation and rites of passage can thrive.

### STEP 1

#### **Develop an anti-hazing policy and identify the consequences of violating it**

Clearly define what constitutes hazing. Many students mistakenly believe that for an activity to constitute hazing, the victim must be unwilling. The policy should state that an activity is hazing even if the person willingly participates. Moreover, a school's policy should convey that hazing will not be tolerated and that any humiliating or demeaning activities are violations. Widely disseminate the policy in student, faculty, and staff handbooks, and on the school's website. Identify the consequences for violating the policy. Hold those who haze — including the entire team or group — accountable for violating the policy. Consequences reinforce the institution's prohibition of degrading and humiliating rites of passage. However, a zero-tolerance policy that expels any student violator may encourage underreporting and drive activities further underground. OSBA can be of great assistance with developing such a policy.

### STEP 2

#### **Create a process for reporting and investigating hazing**

The state of Oregon has created, SafeOregon, a school safety tip line program available to all public schools grades pre-K through 12. The tip line allows students, staff or the public to anonymously report potential threats to student safety, everything from hazing or bullying to substance abuse to self-harm to threats of school violence. Calls are routed to school officials, law enforcement, community mental health programs or public agencies as needed. The hope is to be able to intervene before tragedy strikes. Establish a process in your district for investigating every hazing allegation. To ensure your school district responds promptly and effectively, the investigative process should identify who has investigative responsibilities and outline investigative steps. As appropriate, coordinate investigations with local law enforcement.

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## HAZING IN K-12 SCHOOLS

### STEP 3

#### **Educate the campus about hazing**

Address misconceptions. Often, hazing is perpetuated because of positive misconceptions, such as “it makes someone a better person” or that it is “no big deal.” Hazing in public schools is a significant problem which can result in serious physical or emotional harm to its victims. It’s insidious and often hidden, but chances are it’s occurring at your district.

### STEP 4

#### **Encourage proper supervision and communication**

Ensure that student activities are appropriately supervised. Most hazing incidents occur when students believe that authority figures either won’t see them or will choose to look the other way. When a staff member ignores hazing, students can construe it as tacit acceptance of the behavior in question. Staff members are responsible for identifying, diffusing and discouraging any potential hazing amongst students. They need to understand that they are liable and can face serious consequences if they choose to ignore or otherwise countenance hazing behavior.

### STEP 5

#### **Encourage healthy rituals for establishing group identity and pride**

Do not tolerate treating new members differently. Traditions and rites of passage can establish a sense of belonging and improve cohesiveness between group members. However, they can easily turn into hazing when new members are treated differently. Without proper guidance, students often have difficulty devising safe rites of passage. Promote healthy alternatives to hazing in your district which welcome rather than castigate new members.

### STEP 6

#### **Include hazing prevention in an advisor or coaches’ job responsibilities and evaluation**

An organization leader’s attitude strongly influences whether hazing will occur. When hiring and evaluating coaches and advisors, consider their attitudes toward hazing and the importance they place on welcoming new members. Penalize them for student hazing behavior and for failing to report such incidents to the proper school authorities.

### STEP 7

#### **Address the role of substance abuse in hazing**

Substance abuse, including alcohol misuse, often accompanies hazing behavior. Establish clear policies on substance abuse by students. To encourage policy compliance, establish and enforce consequences for noncompliance. Also, educate students on the district’s policy and the risks associated with substance abuse.