

Discrimination in Education

Attorneys

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Related Services

Education Law
Discrimination in
Education
Special Education, IEP and
504 Plans
Student Rights and
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Student Rights and School
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Overview

Students who face discrimination in school are often met with bureaucratic processes that favor institutional inertia over individual rights. Federal and state law prohibit discrimination based on race, disability, gender, religion, and other protected characteristics in educational settings, but the remedies available to families depend on knowing which laws apply, which agencies have jurisdiction, and how quickly complaints must be filed. Cohen Cleary represents students and families in Massachusetts and Rhode Island pursuing discrimination claims against school districts, including cases involving unequal treatment, failure to accommodate, and harassment by staff or other students.

What Happens When a School Fails to Protect Your Child's Rights?

Federal and state civil rights laws prohibit discrimination in education on the basis of race, disability, gender, religion, national origin, and other protected characteristics. Those protections exist on paper. Enforcing them requires a different kind of effort entirely.

Parents who suspect their child is being treated differently often face a frustrating reality: schools may minimize concerns, reframe discriminatory conduct as routine conflict, dismiss persistent bullying as a peer issue rather than a civil rights violation, or delay meaningful responses until the academic damage is already done. Filing an internal complaint and waiting for results is not always a strategy. Sometimes it is a way of losing time.

Cohen Cleary represents students and families pursuing accountability for discrimination, harassment, and unequal treatment in Massachusetts and Rhode Island schools. Our approach focuses on identifying the specific legal violation, selecting the right enforcement mechanism, and moving with urgency to protect your child's educational access and future.

How We Help Families Address School Harassment and Discrimination

Discrimination in education takes many forms, and each requires a different legal response. We help families identify the right path forward based on the specific facts and the result they need to achieve.

Title VI and Race Discrimination Claims

When a student faces discriminatory treatment, racial harassment, or a hostile environment based on race, color, or national origin, we pursue enforcement through school-level grievance procedures, complaints to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR), or the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD).

Title IX and Gender-Based Discrimination

We represent students experiencing sex-based discrimination, sexual harassment, or inequitable treatment in athletics and academic programs, holding schools accountable under federal law.

Disability Discrimination Under Section 504 and the ADA

Students denied reasonable accommodations, excluded from programs, or subjected to disciplinary action connected to an unaddressed disability have enforceable legal protections that schools are obligated to follow.

Religious Discrimination and State Civil Rights Enforcement

Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 151C and Rhode Island's civil rights statutes prohibit discrimination based on religion, national origin, and other protected characteristics in educational settings. These state-level protections provide complaint pathways and remedies that extend beyond what federal law covers, and they apply to private schools receiving public funds.

Why Students and Families Choose Cohen Cleary

At Cohen Cleary, our practice teams combine deep subject-matter experience with disciplined execution and responsive client service. We do not take a one-size-fits-all approach. Every matter is handled with careful preparation, clear communication, and a strategy tailored to the client's goals and the realities of the forum.

Clients choose Cohen Cleary because we deliver:

Practice-Focused Legal Experience

Our attorneys work in defined practice areas, allowing us to develop practical insight into the legal, procedural, and regulatory nuances that matter most in each case. This focus allows us to anticipate issues, avoid unnecessary delays, and position matters for efficient resolution.

Clear Guidance and Proactive Communication

We prioritize clarity at every stage. Clients receive straightforward explanations of their options, timely updates on developments, and practical advice grounded in real-world outcomes.

Strategic Advocacy with Trial Readiness

Whether a matter calls for negotiation, mediation, or litigation, our attorneys prepare every case with discipline and foresight. We pursue efficient resolution when possible and are fully prepared to advocate aggressively when necessary to protect our clients' interests.

Regional Knowledge and Local Presence

With offices throughout Massachusetts and experience across New England courts and agencies, we bring local insight and regional reach to every matter.

Client-Centered Service

We treat every matter with urgency and respect. Our clients rely on us for responsive service, sound judgment, and steady counsel through complex legal challenges.

In our Education Law work, this approach helps clients navigate discrimination complaints and civil rights enforcement actions with clarity, efficiency, and confidence.

Our Approach to Education Discrimination Cases

Schools sometimes frame disciplinary actions as behavioral issues when the underlying problem is an unaccommodated disability. Parents who accept that narrative at face value may not realize that the conduct was a manifestation of a condition the school was already legally required to address.

We approach every case by examining the full record: the school's knowledge of the student's protected status, what accommodations or protections were in place, what the school failed to do, and what remedies are available. That analysis drives the strategy.

Serving Families Across Massachusetts and Rhode Island

Cohen Cleary represents families in education discrimination matters throughout Massachusetts and Rhode Island. From our offices in [Taunton](#) and [Plymouth](#), we handle complaints involving public school districts, charter schools, and private institutions across southeastern Massachusetts, Bristol County, Plymouth County, Norfolk County, and the greater Boston area.

Our attorneys are familiar with the procedural expectations of OCR's Boston regional office, the MCAD complaint process, and the administrative and litigation pathways available in both states. That familiarity allows us to move efficiently and avoid procedural missteps that can delay resolution.

Protect Your Child's Right to Equal Education and Speak With Our Attorneys

If your child is experiencing discrimination, harassment, bullying, or unequal treatment at school, early legal intervention can change the outcome. Contact Cohen Cleary to discuss your situation and understand what enforcement options may be available under federal and state civil rights law.

Frequently Asked Questions About Education Discrimination

What federal laws protect students from discrimination in school?

Several overlapping federal statutes apply. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination based on race, color, or national origin. Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits sex-based discrimination. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act protect students with disabilities from discrimination and require reasonable accommodations. Each statute covers schools that receive federal financial assistance, which includes virtually all public schools and many private institutions.

How do I file a discrimination complaint against a school district?

You generally have three options, and they are not mutually exclusive. You can file an internal grievance with the school district, file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR), or file with the Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) or the equivalent Rhode Island agency. OCR complaints must typically be filed within

180 days of the discriminatory act. An attorney can help you determine which pathway offers the strongest chance of a meaningful result given your specific facts.

Can I take legal action against a private school for discrimination?

In many cases, yes. Private schools that receive federal financial assistance are subject to Title VI, Title IX, and Section 504. Additionally, Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 151C prohibits discrimination in educational institutions regardless of their public or private status. The available remedies and complaint processes may differ, but private schools are not exempt from civil rights accountability simply because they are privately operated.

What remedies are available if my child experiences discrimination at school?

Available remedies depend on the enforcement mechanism used. Through OCR or MCAD, a school may be required to change policies, provide staff training, or implement corrective measures. In litigation, families may seek compensatory education (additional services to make up for lost educational opportunity), monetary damages for emotional distress, and, in some cases, attorneys' fees. The goal is both to address the harm your child experienced and to prevent the same conduct from affecting other students.