

A new playing field

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Forty years ago this month President Nixon signed into law legislation that prohibits educational institutions that receive federal funding from discriminating on the basis of gender. The legislation, which came to be known as Title IX, was intended to cover a range of issues—discrimination in recruitment, admissions, financial aid and academic programs—but it has largely come to be associated with opening doors for women in athletics. By requiring schools to give women the same opportunities to play sports as men have, Title IX revolutionized sports at the scholastic and collegiate levels. The Women’s Sports Foundation reports that over 3 million girls now participate in high school sports, compared to under 300,000 four decades ago.

The results show up not only on the playing field. A recent issue of *Sports Illustrated* reports that “girls who compete in sports get better grades, graduate at higher rates and have more confidence. The vast majority avoid unplanned pregnancies, drugs, obesity, depression and suicide.” One study showed that teenage female athletes are less than half as likely to get pregnant as female nonathletes, are more likely to never have had sexual intercourse and are more likely to postpone having it. Female high school athletes do better on average in science classes than nonathletes, and women who participate in stereotypically male sports do better in science than athletes who participate in traditionally female sports. Girls who play high school sports are more likely to complete a college degree.

Fathers of female athletes are among some of the most ardent supporters of Title IX. Recently the California Assembly was discussing a resolution to recognize the law's 40th anniversary. One assemblyman, a former high school coach, admitted that originally he opposed the law, thinking it would harm men's sports. All that changed, he said, on the day his daughter was born.

The successful implementation of Title IX in sports and its widespread acceptance has brought a new generation of challenges. Some critics complain that Title IX has inadvertently led to the elimination of men's teams at some universities. As the law has been enforced, institutions have the choice of demonstrating compliance in one of three ways: showing that the number of female athletes is proportionate to the share of female enrollment overall; demonstrating a continuing commitment to expanding sports for women; or proving that the athletic interests and abilities of the female student body are being met. Since the first test provides the easiest means of demonstrating compliance, some schools cut less-popular male sports in order to bring the proportion of sports participation in line with male-female enrollment.

Advocates for women argue that the problem is not Title IX but the overemphasis on the revenue-generating sports of men's football and basketball—whose athletes are treated better than athletes in other sports, male or female.

While the application and enforcement of Title IX continues to be debated, its widely acknowledged successes show that government legislation requiring fair treatment (sometimes derisively referred to as "social engineering") can be both efficient and transformative in creating equal opportunity and enhancing lives.