SHEPARD O'DONNELL
MASSACHUSETTS TRIAL LAWYERS

Massachusetts School Sex Abuse

Childhood Sex Abuse Laws and Warning Signs

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Childhood Sexual Abuse Laws in Massachusetts

Many survivors don't come forward for years — and the law gives you time. Here are the current deadlines to understand.

Criminal Charges

No time limit to report. After 27 years, independent evidence (from a doctor r therapist) is required. If you were under 16, the 27-year clock starts at age 16 or when you report.

Civil Claim Against an Abuser

Up to **35 years** from the abuse, **or 7 years** from when you discovered the harm, whichever is later. The clock starts at age 18 (often until about age 53).

Civil Claim Against an Institution

Abuse **after June 26, 2014**: up to 35 years / age 53 against the institution. Abuse **before** that date: generally the abuser only, not the institution.

Limits on Compensation

Some caps apply — charities ~$20,000; nonprofit healthcare ~$100,000; public employers ~$100,000 (limited exceptions).

▲ You can take the precautionary step of filing your claim before the statute of limitations runs out, even if you later decide not to pursue the case.



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SCHOOL SEXUAL ABUSE

Warning Signs & Grooming in Schools

Abuse by a teacher, coach, or staff member is rarely a single act. It often begins with grooming and an abuse of authority. Know what to watch for:

GROOMING BEHAVIORS

- Singling out a student with excessive attention or favoritism
- Giving gifts or special privileges
- Building emotional dependence; making a child feel 'special'
- Informal contact by texting or social media
- Demanding secrecy
- Gradually blurring physical and personal boundaries

THE POWER IMBALANCE

- Adults influence grades, discipline, recommendations & playing time
- Students fear retaliation, embarrassment, or not being believed
- A student must return and face the abuser every day
- Sexual activity with 16- and 17-year-olds by a person in authority is now a felony



Schools can be held liable when they ignore warning signs or quietly 'pass the trash.'

In many cases, colleagues and administrators allegedly observed concerning conduct but failed to intervene, supervise, or report it appropriately. In other instances, institutions were accused of prioritizing reputation management over student safety. This often involves an especially troubling practice that advocates have identified as "passing the trash", which describes situations where an employee accused of misconduct quietly leaves one school and later obtains work elsewhere without meaningful disclosure of prior concerns.

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SCHOOL SEXUAL ABUSE

Frequently Asked Questions

What is grooming in school sexual abuse cases?
Grooming is a pattern of manipulative behavior used by predators to gain a student's trust, create emotional dependence, and blur boundaries before abuse occurs.

Can a school be held responsible for sexual abuse by a teacher or coach?
Yes. Schools and institutions may face civil liability if they failed to supervise staff, ignored complaints, or failed to take reasonable steps to protect students.

What does "passing the trash" mean?
"Passing the trash" refers to situations where an educator accused of misconduct quietly leaves one school and later obtains employment at another school without meaningful disclosure of prior concerns.

Can survivors still pursue legal action years later?
In some cases, yes. Massachusetts has expanded statutes of limitations for certain childhood sexual abuse claims, allowing some survivors additional time to come forward, typically up to age 53.



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