



OCR announces new assistance and education center

A new center within the [U.S. Education Department's Office for Civil Rights](#) will be dedicated to proactive compliance and ensure better awareness of federal civil rights laws, ED announced Tuesday.

The Outreach, Prevention, Education and Non-discrimination Center, or OPEN Center, will be based at OCR headquarters in Washington, D.C., but will work with schools, educators, families, and students throughout the country in an effort to address compliance with federal civil rights laws before a complaint of a violation is made, according to a statement from ED.

"The OPEN Center is all about strengthening civil rights compliance through voluntary, proactive activities," said OCR Assistant Secretary Kenneth L. Marcus. "Instead of waiting for violations to occur before responding, OCR will get in front of the problem, partnering with educators and other institutions to better protect students."

Joshua Douglass, a partner at [Mickes O'Toole LLC](#) in Missouri and Illinois and a former chief attorney for the OCR regional office in Kansas City, Mo., said the new OPEN center has the potential to positively impact the quality and timing of answers to questions the public has about the application of laws regarding equal access in education.

"While the initiative has just been announced and we have yet to see how the department implements it, the OPEN Center could potentially serve as a helpful resource for schools that are trying to get out in front of their civil rights obligations," Douglass said.

Douglass also said he sees value in having consistent information from a centralized office. "Having one source of technical assistance will at least standardize the information provided to schools, which is very helpful in technical areas such as accessibility standards and grievance procedures," he said.

The new center also may allow regional offices the ability to focus on addressing a backlog of complaints, Douglass said.

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Ron Hager, managing attorney for education and employment for the [National Disability Rights Network](#), also sees potential in the new center. "I am a firm believer in the principle that an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure, so if this center operates as stated, it could be a very viable alternative to filing OCR complaints," Hager said.

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