



Bernice Sandler and the Fight for Title IX: Interview With the Author



This year marks the 50th anniversary of the passage of Title IX, which protects people from discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities that receive federal financial assistance. Jen Barton, author of *Bernice Sandler and the Fight for Title IX*, shares some insights into creating the book.

Magination Press: What inspired you to write *Bernice Sandler and the Fight for Title IX*?

Jen Barton: Dr. Sandler died in January 2019. At that time, I'd never heard of her and hadn't thought much about Title IX. I was born in 1971, the year before the law passed, and grew up benefiting from a protection I never knew I'd needed. And as an adult, I only had a vague understanding that the law had something to do with sports. But in January 2019, I read a blurb about Bunny's death, which mentioned her many accomplishments and how important she'd been in the fight for women's equity in education. I wondered how someone so influential could've been so unknown to me, how I hadn't learned in school about someone whose tireless fight had guaranteed my right to play softball or take shop class, if I wanted. I wondered why I didn't know her name. I'm grateful to Bunny and the generations of women who came before, who fought for rights I enjoy. Writing the book felt like a way to honor her, her work, and to share her incredible story.

My hope is that as readers follow Bunny navigating obstacles, finding her voice, and figuring out how she could make a difference, they too will find their own voice and use it to fight for what matters most to them.

MP: The 50th anniversary of the ruling is in 2022. Is Bernice's story more relevant now than ever?

JB: Bunny's story is absolutely more relevant than ever. Women may not have to have their husband or father co-sign to get a credit card or a home loan anymore, but the fight for gender equity is far from over. Let's not forget, the ERA still hasn't been ratified. The wage gap is alive and well. And the LGBTQ community is under attack. My hope is that as readers follow Bunny navigating obstacles, finding her voice, and figuring out how she could make a difference,

they too will find their own voice and use it to fight for what matters most to them. I also hope readers come away with the idea that it doesn't take a person with power to make a difference. More often, it takes determination.

MP: Why do you think it's important for kids to know about Bernice and about Title IX?

JB: Title IX is such a workhorse of legislation. Bunny and fellow activists fought to make it illegal for institutions that receive federal funds to discriminate on the basis of sex. Yes, that means equitable locker rooms and uniforms regardless of gender, but the law also protects pregnant and parenting students from discrimination. And it protects against sexual harassment—from a creepy hand on your shoulder to assault. Title IX is a powerful resource everyone should be aware of. Kids should know they're protected, that there's a law making it illegal for them to be bullied because they don't conform to a stereotypical concept of masculinity or femininity, that it's illegal for sexual harassment to interfere with their education. They should know their school has to have a Title IX Coordinator. Hopefully students will never have to make use of the coordinator, but they deserve to be informed.

MP: As you were researching the book, what surprised you?

JB: I was surprised to discover that Bunny didn't identify as a feminist until later in her journey. When her colleague told her she was "too strong for a woman", she believed him. She thought she'd deserved the criticism. That surprised me. But as I thought about it, the more I appreciated it. She was an unexpected activist, a woman who not only faced obstacles outside of herself, but inside as well. It must've taken strength to examine her views on feminism and re-evaluate what had previously been so clear to her. I admire that.

MP: Your book is a biography, but you've included activities at the end of each chapter. Why did you do that?

JB: I love the activities for two reasons. First, I wanted readers to have another way to connect with Bunny's story. The activities at the end of each chapter help bridge the gap between Bunny's time and the present for the reader. Second, I wanted readers to have a chance to explore their own activism. This book is a celebration of Bernice Sandler and her activism, but it's also an invitation to community involvement, to empower young people to be engaged. Activism comes in many forms—loud, soft, very forward, sometimes in the background—and they're all valuable. I wanted readers to have fun trying new things and perhaps find what might resonate for them.

MP: Many people think of Title IX as just focusing on sports, but it is about so much more than that. How did sports become a big focal point of the law?

JB: The early fight for Title IX was about equity in education. The data that Bunny presented to Edith Green in the congressional hearing was pulled from educators (mostly, but not all, women) who had experienced discrimination based on their gender. Many had been passed over for promotions, some hadn't received tenure, etc. Back then, Bunny didn't anticipate the impact the law would have on sports. But when gender discrimination in federally funded institutions became illegal, and girls were suddenly allowed to play, the response was overwhelming. The floodgates opened and girls have been playing ever since, making gender equity in sports one of the most visible impacts of the law.

MP: How does an increased social awareness and understanding of gender identity impact Title IX?

JB: I think the biggest thing for readers to know is that they have rights, regardless of their gender identity. Despite the increased negative attacks on the LGBTQ community, they are still protected under Title IX. For example, even though the Trump administration withdrew previous guidance on how Title IX protects transgender and gender nonconforming students, the law hasn't changed. Under Title IX, schools are required to respect students' names, pronouns, and access to single-sex bathrooms. Additionally, students, including transgender and gender nonconforming students, are protected from bullying because they don't conform to stereotypes of masculinity or femininity. Title IX seems poised to be at the forefront of LGBTQ students' rights.

MP: What is your favorite part of the book?

JB: That's a tough one. I was thrilled to be able to speak to Bunny's daughters and get their invaluable insight into the more personal side of their mom, and I was very excited to partner with Sage Carson from Know Your IX and have her write the How To Be an Activist section at the end. Both of those elements add wonderful dimensions to the book, I think. But if I have to choose, it would be the Intro written by Margaret Dunkle. Margaret knew Bunny. She was a close friend of hers. She ran in the same circles and was there fighting for Title IX with Bunny! She was an invaluable partner and it was an absolute honor to talk with her and have her involvement.

MP: What do you like to do when you aren't reading?

JB: I'm a huge foodie, so I've always got some recipe buzzing in my head. I also love gardening, which fits perfectly with cooking. Right now, I'm enchanted by the latest discovery in my garden: Each morning I find a few bees asleep in the blossoms of my calla lilies. They tuck themselves headfirst into the big blossoms and rest. When the sun warms them, they fly off for the day. It's over-the-top adorable and a fantastic way to start each morning.

MP: When you were a kid, what was your favorite book?

JB: I loved *Charlotte's Web*! I couldn't stand the tension White created with that epic first line. Where WAS Papa going with that ax?? I had to know. And Fern and Wilbur and Charlotte (and all the rest, including Templeton the Rat) were such a rich and compelling cast. I wanted a piglet to bottle feed SO MUCH. Alas, no pig for me. I was terrified for Wilbur and, of course, cried when Charlotte died. I sometimes wonder if that page of every copy all over the world is crinkled with dried tears. I still read it and marvel at White's skill.

This Article's Author

Jen Barton is the author of six books for kids, including *What's Your Story, Amelia Earhart?* (Lerner Classroom), *What's Your Story, Harriet Tubman?* (Lerner Classroom), and *School Shootings* (BrightPoint Press). Jen lives in Pennsylvania. You can visit her website for more information.