

County school districts adjust in #MeToo era

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The #MeToo movement has brought attention to sexual harassment in the movie industry, politics, restaurants and virtually every workplace in the country. But one place that it has been rampant in for years is in school. As the culture shifts to be more respectful of women's rights, so too have educators' approaches on how to instill that ethic within the male student population and to protect girls who feel their dignity has been affronted.

In a national study published in 2011 that canvassed nearly 2,000 female students in grades seven through 12, results indicated that 48 percent of the students experienced some form of sexual harassment in that school year. Close to 90 percent said it had a negative effect on them, according to the American Association of University Women, an advocacy group promoting equity and education for women and girls.

On social media and in letters received by the Daily American, women who graduated from some of Somerset County's school districts said they had similar experiences while attending the local educational facilities.

At Rockwood Area School District, the policy for reporting and investigating sexual harassment claims is much like those at other schools. First, a student or staff member tells administrators about the problem. An investigation is followed by an official report and then district action insofar as punishment is concerned. There is also an appeals process for both the accuser and the accused.

Mark Bower, superintendent of Rockwood Area School District, said that he can't say whether it's a major issue because the national figure of 48 percent experiencing sexual harassment doesn't line up with the percentage of women reporting it.

"That doesn't mean it's not happening," Bower said. "My hope is we can lower those statistics. It's unfortunate and it's happened in the past. We have to address those concerns. But it's certainly important that we provide those educational lessons."

Bower said he thinks it's important for older men and women to be role models for the student population to diminish the incidents of sexual harassment.

"Again I think through example you show those boys," Bower said. "I think many times the example you set for others is the most important. But with teachers and young kids, there are roles that you can show males and females that their actions have consequences with those that they're interacting with."

Another issue some young women in local school districts face is shaming for sexual activity that they get from other girls and boys. They can be called a slut, tramp or other disparaging epithet.

“There's always issues of peer pressure in students,” Bower said. “I don't think it's unique to sexual harassment. But peer pressure among adolescents has a profound effect on individuals. When it's applied in a negative way, it's unfortunate. I'm sure it happens as it does in other incidents.”

Krista Mathias, superintendent of Somerset Area School District, said it is critical for female students to report the issue to a guidance counselor, school social worker or administrator. The problem can't be addressed unless they know about it. She said the buildings are covered by interior and exterior cameras, so reports can be verified through video evidence. Mathias also has a piece of advice for parents.

“Social media, texting and sexting have increased opportunities for students to treat one another disrespectfully,” Mathias said. “Even though most social media interactions occur outside of the school day, the consequences often spill over into school hours. Parents and guardians should monitor social media accounts, especially each app's instant messaging feature, to be sure their children's interactions are not crossing the line.”

Thomas Kakabar, superintendent of Conemaugh Township Area School District, said accusations made against students are handled through a disciplinary process. They investigate the claim and try to ascertain exactly what happened. They meet with parents, and if it was proven it took place, they would call for a punishment, right up to arrest and adjudication if warranted.

“The boys will be boys mentality isn't acceptable anymore obviously with everything that has taken place in society,” Kakabar said. “That's something we don't permit or allow to take place here. Obviously, if it is reported to us. If they don't tell us, we won't know about it.”

Kakabar said he gets one or two reports a year dealing with sexual harassment or misconduct, and more often than not it deals with inappropriate touching more than commentary regarding body parts. Though statistically most incidents of sexual misconduct go unreported, Kakabar thinks that he's getting the information on when they do.

“I think our kids are good about reporting things here,” he said. “There are issues we deal with on a weekly or daily basis. That's one thing we feel lucky as administrators because our kids feel comfortable approaching us.”

Many of the local school districts have implemented the Botvin LifeSkills Training Program, which is used in schools and communities throughout the U.S. and in 39 countries around the world. Teens are educated early on how to deal with their sexual feelings and understand accepted limits. According to the program's website, experts find that sexual harassment begins at the middle school level and escalates through high school. The program focuses on how teens and preteens learn to deal with treating the opposite sex as their own bodies develop.

Sean Wechtenhiser, principal of Shade-Central City High School, said there have been a few issues with sexual harassment of students by other ones at the school. They typically run them through the guidance counselor, and if it continues they may suspend the student accused of sexual harassment or report them to police. In general, Wechtenhiser thinks female students have come forward to report the issues.

“It's not a comfortable topic, but they came forward,” he said. “That allows us to help them with the issues. In general, we've had a lot of discussion with our students in sharing information. We had some issues with threatening statements this past year, so we've encouraged people to come forward. And that's true of bullying as well.”

Wechtenhiser said he encourages parents to come forward with any reports from their children about sexual harassment or anything else that would be inappropriate at public schools.

“I've told them, even with bullying issues, if they hear things at home, don't assume they've told us. So give us a call and let us know what's going on so we're aware of things. I'm a parent myself; there are times when my kids come home and I ask them if they talked to someone at school with that. So we should keep open lines of communication.”