

Schools have always been a place to learn. Many students are learning about what sexual harassment is, but too many are not learning that it's wrong.

Sexual harassment, defined by law, is any unwelcome sexual advances, requests, or actions. Sexual harassment is not longer limited to work places or college campuses. In fact, it may be occurring as early as junior high.

Teachers and administrators have long dismissed sexual harassment as "flirting," "teasing," or "boys just being boys." Recently, a senior at Ashtabula High School was suspended for harassing a female student.

Schools with rules already established against harassment should not "brush over" them. Instead, they are enforcing them and encouraging victims to have the courage to confront the harasser and report those involved to school administrators.

Lindsay Grubbs, a junior at Ashtabula, said, "There is nothing you can do to prevent it. It will always happen."

Students should reconsider their actions before they decide to write harmful graffiti about other students, or make rude comments about "your weekend."

In February 1992, the Supreme Court ruled that students can sue the schools for damages -- physical or mental -- for not resolving the problem.

A Duluth, Minn. female received \$15,000 from the school administration after graffiti was discovered about her in the men's room, and the school officials did not remove it.

The same thing could happen here in Ashtabula.

An independent survey given to students at Ashtabula High School showed 29 percent were harassed everyday. The others averaged out to about 14 percent once a week, 43 percent once a month, 10 percent once or twice a year, and 4 percent have never been harassed.

"It goes too far with little problems, but teachers should encourage kids to report things that really bother them," said Chris Hungerford, a junior at Ashtabula.

Senior Jennifer Hall said, "Sexual harassment may be taken too seriously. Every little thing you do or say could be taken as a form of harassment."

The Ashtabula School district has a policy stating the consequences and definition of sexual harassment. Offensive behavior includes:

- Unwanted sexual advances, including repeatedly asking someone out for a date after it's clear that the person is not interested.
- Explicitly or implicitly offering employment benefits in exchange for sexual favors.
- Making or threatening reprisals after a negative response to sexual advances.

- Nonverbal conduct: leering; making sexual gestures; displaying sexually aggressive objects, pictures, cartoons, or posters.
- Verbal conduct: making or using derogatory comments, slurs, or jokes; making sexually based remarks about another person's or one's own body.
- Verbal abuse of sexual nature, graphic verbal commentaries about an individual's body, sexually degrading words used to describe an individual, suggestive or obscene letters, notes or invitations.
- Physical conduct: touching; assault, impeding or blocking movement.

The sexual harassment policy is intended to protect against harassment before it happens.

Any student that believes he or she has been sexually harassed should tell the harasser to cease. If that doesn't help, they need to complain to school counselors, administrators, or any staff member.

Melinda Urick will be a senior at Ashtabula High School this fall.