

STUDENTS AND ADMINISTRATION DISCUSS SEXUAL ASSAULT

Conversation sparked by local and national news events

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Contributor

BLACK SHIRTS FLOODED THE HALLWAYS of BV West and other Kansas City high schools on Sept. 21. After the Kansas City Star reported that a female, freshman student at Shawnee Mission East was sexually assaulted in the boys bathroom, students wore black and used the hashtag 'WearBlacktoStopAttacks' to spread awareness on social media.

The student accused of the Sept. 14 assault, is now charged with three counts of aggravated indecent liberties with a child and one count of lewd and lascivious behavior.

"I participated [in the awareness movement] because I heard what had happened to the student from Shawnee Mission East," said junior Jacob Braun. "And I realized that being a leader at West, I should help show that another high school in the area stands with the student, as well as anyone else who has been assaulted."

As news of the alleged assault began to circulate among students, one common theme emerged: frustration. While students were frustrated that a sexual assault occurred on a school campus, many were specifically frustrated with the way that the Shawnee Mission East administration apparently handled the assault.

"I think they [Shawnee Mission East administration] did a poor job with controlling the situation," junior Julia Nichols said. "Reading the Kansas City Star and other news outlets, it didn't seem like the administration at SME took the situation seriously."

While some students speculated that the punishment given to the accused was insufficient, others believe that school personnel should not handle situations of this severity.

"I don't really think that they [administration] should've handled it because that's sexual assault, not a cheating scandal,"



junior Annika Jensen said. "I think that's a serious thing and administration can't give a punishment that the crime is worthy of."

While rumors swirled about the punishments that the accuser received (to date) from the Prairie Village Police Department, the action that the Shawnee Mission school district took was a topic of concern and discussion.

"When a crime occurs at school, the school is required to call the Overland Park Police Department and the situation is dealt with in two separate aspects," Principal

Dr. Potts said. "On the one hand, the police department handles their investigation and on the other hand Blue Valley West would handle their side of the investigation. The administration would work with the police, but the way a situation is handled and how much punishment is given at Blue Valley West is different than what the police would be doing."

The prevailing impression about the SME sexual assault case is that the accused should not have been in school after a previous incident in middle school. Privacy laws prevent administrators from discussing punishments, creating a system many believe only protects the accused.

"The only people who can know about disciplinary situations and how they're being handled are police, parents and the students involved," Potts said. "If a sexual assault were to occur, we [administration] aren't even allowed to tell the parents of the victim how the person [accused] is being punished, and that creates a lot of frustration because then parents don't know if the situation is being handled in a way that they deem appropriate."

The conversations that have occurred surrounding sexual assault and how it is dealt with on high school campuses leads students to wonder how BV West would handle a similar case.

"The number one priority is always the safety of the student," Potts said. "The first thing we [administration] do is make sure that what occurred won't happen again."

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After a claim of sexual assault is reported, administration contacts the police and then the two authority groups figure out how they are going to punish the alleged offender and how the victim can learn in a safe, respectful environment.

While policies of how teachers should report "unsafe behavior" such as sexual assault can be found on the Blue Valley School District's website, the district website gives no concrete, uniform policy that states how a sexual assault incident would be handled.

"Each situation that comes to administration is handled differently based off of the details of that particular situation, so there isn't one specific way that we [Blue Valley] can say that we would handle it," Potts said. "The district policy is actively being worked on so that it is more straightforward and accessible on the Blue Valley District website."

Under current Title IX laws, schools are required to make arrangements for a student who files an assault complaint, so that they can still attend school and can be separated from their alleged attacker.

"We [administration] would create an intervention plan for the victim so that they could still go to school, be protected from harassment to the best of our abilities and be separated from the alleged attacker," said Potts. "We would move schedules around so that the accused and accuser wouldn't be in the same classes or lunch periods together."

While some students expressed irritation with administration because they feel that issues like sexual assault are dealt with reactively instead of proactively, Potts expressed confidence that the school was doing a good job.

"A student at West receives

different types of training regarding sexual assault throughout their four years here at West," said Potts. "Whether that's enough, I don't know. I don't know how much is ever enough but there is always more that we could be doing to address these issues."

According to a poll of 213 students taken on the BV West Spotlight Twitter account on Oct. 21, 61% of students feel they



are not informed about policies regarding sexual assault at our school.

"The fact that I, a female, haven't heard a word about a way of defense against this or even a change in the system to prevent this is pretty outrageous," junior Katherine Edmunds said. "It's a very scary and challenging thing to be a girl and the lack of action that was taken is a very serious problem."

Student Resource Officer Jimmie Neal believes that some sexual assaults occur without the victim or the perpetrator understanding what happened.

"I've had it [sexual assault] happen more than once on a

high school campus," said Neal. "If a sexual assault occurs most students are not educated enough to realize that they've reached that level or threshold where they know what they are doing is a crime."

With students not having knowledge of the definition of what constitutes sexual assaults, members of the counseling department think that the school can do a better job with the way sexual assault training occurs.

"It [sexual assault] works better as a small group lesson rather than having 400 freshman students in the PAC," counselor Kim Urenda said. "It's hard for me as one person to go around to every advisory and give a lesson about sexual assault. But that would be my hope is that one day we could do individual advisory lessons."

After serious incidents like sexual assault occurs, Neal thinks that the team here does a thorough job of providing the students involved with as many resources as possible.

"In any type of serious situation the administration and I try to ensure the student, parent and anyone else involved that we are here for you and any one thing that we can do for you, we will do it," said Neal.

Neal, Potts and Urenda all urge students to come forward if an incident like sexual assault occurs.

"If something is going on, you need to reach out to me or your administrator," said Neal. "If you see something, you need to say something. This school is its own community and there is only one police officer, so you guys are going to see things and know things way before I do, so if you know something make sure you inform someone. The best thing that West can continue to do is to have each other's backs and support one another."

Photo Illustrations by Ryan Barrett