

RIGHTS OF PASSAGE

JCHS FRESHMEN LEARN ABOUT FUTURE JOBS, RESPONSIBILITIES

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The Junction City high school students Jeremy Deckard is talking to this week don't have jobs. Someday, they will; and with those jobs come certain rights and responsibilities.

Deckard, public information officer for the Kansas Human Rights Commission, is talking with the school's freshmen about those rights and responsibilities.

His hour-long sessions with students in the Freshman Success Academy center on discrimination and harassment. Many students may not realize that their behavior in the hallway can't carry over into the workplace, Deckard said.

He mentioned one incident he witnessed at the school, when a male student inappropriately grabbed a female student in the hallway. "If she doesn't tell him that's unwelcome, he's going to keep doing it," Deckard said.

Such harassment doesn't need to be tolerated at school or at work, he explains, but rules exist on how to handle such situations.

For a worker to complain about another co-worker, customer or even supervisor, they must first tell the offender that his or her actions are not welcome. If the employee isn't comfortable doing that, he or she can report the incident to a supervisor, Deckard said.

If the supervisor does nothing to stop the offensive behavior, Deckard's agency steps in to investigate the employer. The KHRC doesn't have law enforcement power like a police department, but it can levy fines and subpoena witnesses in the course of its investigation, he said.

Evidence is the key part in providing that an employee is indeed being harassed at work. Even then, it must fall under the guidelines of Kansas Act Against Discrimination.

"There are lots of things that can create conflict in the workplace," Deckard said. "But just because it's unfair doesn't mean it's necessarily illegal."

This isn't the first time Deckard has visited JCHS. He spoke with students in the fall about diversity in the work environment.

Fortunately, that's something that Junction City students have a pretty good handle on because of the large number of black, Hispanic and Korean ethnic students who attend the school.

“I would expect that in a high school where there were more homogenous students, it would be a very different kind of talk. But for our students, they understand diversity,” said Linda Powers, Life Skills teacher at JCHS.

Powers arranged Deckard’s visit with students and likes how he interacts with them. Deckard is a former teacher, so the territory is familiar to him.

“I like that he is both informing them of what their rights are... and he also talks about their responsibility not to offend their fellow workers,” Powers said.