In this series about teachers being bullied, I first looked at the matter of top-down bullying, where teachers are being bullied by the system. I pointed out that some of these cases involved system leaders doing the bullying, while in others, it was the government or other higher power that was responsible. In this issue, I want to consider another form of bullying – that done by parents.

It might strike many readers as strange that parents should be listed as bullies in schools, especially given the great efforts that so many of them make to keep our schools afloat. Indeed, it is fair to say that many schools that are open today owe their existence to the heroic efforts of parents, rather than the beneficence of governments or the performance of churches. I know this because I have worked in such a school – a school that rose from its own ashes because the parents were determined to be heard and to have their children educated the way they wanted.

I salute the many thousands of parents whose voluntary efforts, self-sacrifice and forethought are such a vital component of so many Australian schools today. On the other hand, I also acknowledge that there are some parents who are simply bullies and one of their favoured targets is the teaching profession. I have confronted such people and I am sure that many people reading this article could say the same.

It is appropriate at this stage to recall that a bully is someone who uses their power in order to force others to do things their way. Just as a playground bully can demand lollies from a smaller child, or inflict physical pain, or ostracise a peer by demanding the loyalty of other classmates, so a bullying parent can wreak havoc by calling on various underhanded strategies to make life awkward, even unbearable, for a teacher.

Without claiming to have covered the whole territory, I would suggest that there are five groups of parent bullies, ranging from the pernicious to the irksome. It is quite likely that you will be able to identify people in your own experience who fall into at least some of these categories, and you might be able to add other types. My five classes of bully are:

- The Litigation Expert
- The System Spy
- The Pouting Pull-out
- The Tennis Club Talker
- The Bitter Volunteer

Perhaps I should introduce each of them to you.

The Litigation Expert

Have you ever been pulled up by a pupil who says “You can’t do that – you could be sued.”? I suspect that these are the offspring of parents who want to sue their local Council if they cannot find a parking space in the main street, or to sue their local bakery if the bread goes stale in less than five days. Sadly, such parents do exist and they are not afraid to seek legal redress if
they are unhappy. These are the parents who believe every word from their child’s lips about school activities – “My child never lies!” or those who are able to put new words into the mouths of their children if they had previously been happy to report a good day in school.

I suggest that these are the parents who contact the Ombudsman, rather than discussing the problem at school level, because they like to think that they are knowledgeable about their rights. Sadly, they seem very ignorant of their responsibilities. They are so intent on being proved correct in their demands that they fail to appreciate the unnecessary damage being created by their failure to follow the accepted protocols (This statement in no way aims to limit sensible decisions to go the appropriate authorities if the lower levels have ignored their call for help. Not all legal complaints are vexatious. However, those who insist of going straight to the top – cutting out the middle person – might need to examine their motives. Are they just on a power trip?)

The System Spy

This is the parent who takes on the self-appointed role of reporting every infringement of the rule – real or imagined – that they see in a school. If a road safety flag is left out overnight, they write a passionate email to the school authorities. If the canteen runs out of fruit juice before their little darling gets served, another email hits the airwaves. If a swimmer is awarded a prize ahead of the parent’s own child, a lengthy letter is sent to explain how the award winner actually broke the rules, and should have been disqualified (co-incidentally raising their own child from second place to first!). The letter, of course, is sent to the Director-General or even the Minister.

Funnily, these well-informed and highly literate parents rarely have the time or the energy to write positive letters explaining how the teacher’s prompt actions saved the lives of three students threatened by a brown snake, or how the close attention to detail by a school secretary prevented serious fraud. Oh no! Let someone else see those things and commend their efforts are so vital in our schools.

You might wonder why I describe this (often) unwitting spoiler as a bully, but my reason is simple: that person is using personal power (politely called obnoxiousness) to get their own way. They might well be offended at being included in a list of bullies, but how else can you describe someone who, by refusing to think of others, can single-handedly destroy the good will and boundless energy of people who want to improve education?

Do labels really help?

It would be reasonable to ask whether these labels actually help us cope with bullying in the workplace. As teachers we all know that labels identify a problem, but rarely solve it. In recent years we have often been reminded that just because we know that a child is autistic or hearing-impaired or spoiled doesn’t really help to solve the problem. We have to look more deeply if we are going to find realistic ways to deal with the problem. I readily admit that the same is true in dealing with parent bullies.

Nevertheless, the labels do serve one purpose: they alert us to a real danger. The parents described in this simple taxonomy are to be found in most schools and the damage they can do is both serious and lasting. The litigious parent, the espionage agent, and the parent who is always threatening to leave are deliberate trouble makers. The other two are often unconscious of the damage they cause. All five, however, can make life more difficult, more unpleasant for conscientious teachers as well as for dedicated parents and ultimately for the children they serve.

For your homework, see if you can add to my list (I’d love to hear of other types, and you can contact me at dwseleigh@tpg.com.au). However, a more important part of your homework is to remember the importance of balance; just because you have a bully in your class it doesn’t mean you have a class of bullies; likewise, just because some parents offend in the ways I have suggested, let us never overlook the contribution made by the majority of parents who come into our classes. They share with you a genuine passion for the success of their children, and this shared passion will support you as you move through the various challenges of teaching. Be aware of the bullies but be especially grateful for the majority of parents whose efforts are so vital in our schools.