

Keep your hands to yourself

Dennis Sleight on dealing with parents who bully staff

What happens when a parent seriously disagrees with a school about the behavior of other children, a staff member or the administration? The answer would depend on many factors, reflecting the atmosphere of the school, the social maturity of the protagonists, and the nature of the disagreement. It is clear from media reports over recent years that not all such disagreements are handled effectively.

In *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens reminds us that accidents happen even in the best regulated families. It will come as no surprise then to learn that some parents become very volatile in certain situations, leading to serious abuse of teachers and other staff even in high fee schools. In case you might have wondered whether angry parents only enrolled their children in lower socio-economic schools, a recent news report informed listeners that expensive private schools are not spared the threat of irate parents. (<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-07-02/st-andrews-cathedral-school-principal-warns-of-parent-aggression/9929004>)

The principal of the school in question, clearly conscious of his obligation to provide a safe working environment, unequivocally reminded parents that there was no place for such behaviour and he explained that “the fees they pay do not entitle them to behave aggressively towards teachers.” Teachers from other schools would, I am sure, applaud the stand taken by this principal – he advised parents who behaved inappropriately towards his staff that their actions would not be tolerated.

It is good to see that this misbehavior is recognized and then openly revealed – even if all schools might actually prefer it if outsiders never heard about such incidents. Today, in the #MeToo age, it has become important to confront offenders, so that the strength of society can be

harnessed to counter such instances. It is one more occasion where community opinion can be marshalled to raise standards and prevent bullies from getting their own way.

What I find particularly interesting about this news report is the suggestion that some parents, because they pay high school fees, feel they have the right to make excessive demands on teachers, seeing the situation as a master-servant relationship. One can only wonder if these ‘masters’ treat their subordinates at work in the same way – and whether the ‘servants’ simply take it on the chin. Let’s hope not!

I am not sure that paying fees is really a significant catalyst in these confrontations between parents and teachers; I have seen similar problems emerge in public schools and in low-fee private schools, where the financial relationship is far less obvious. (One person interviewed in the telecast of this news story suggested that some people might see that because it is their taxes that fund the wages of teachers, they – honest tax-payers every one – can still operate within this weird master-servant connection. I would probably believe this if I saw the offenders dealing in the same way with police officers, soldiers and prison guards, to mention just some other groups sustained by the tax dollar.)

Regardless of the cause of the abhorrent behavior, we must face the reality that some parents do behave poorly towards teachers, and principals must view this as a major issue. The principal whose experience is reported in this story remarked that in his lengthy career in leadership he had witnessed a growth in this problem and he added that perhaps it reflects the increased anxiety throughout society. I would agree, just as I would say that no principal today can ignore any signs of violence towards the staff, any more than they could ignore violence towards their pupils.

While a principal’s duty of care towards students is undeniable, there is no reason to suggest that they owe any less care to their staff. Apart from legal requirements to support workplace health and safety, there is another strong reason for school leaders to make sure they are seen as protecting their staff: teachers and others who are well supported may be more determined to care properly for those under their protection – a major concern for every school.

Multiple forms of bullying

Once we raise the question of bullying by parents, we see that there are many ways in which this can happen. It is not always a physical confrontation, such as shouting at or threatening a staff member that causes the problem. A far more subtle concern might be the parent who attacks the integrity of a staff member by gossiping or innuendo. This is certainly a serious threat in a small rural community, but it is a reality in metropolitan areas as well. Most of these negative discussions, I suspect, occur outside school. They are no longer confined to parental discussions in the carpark or over the frozen goods section at the local supermarket; today they occur primarily through social media. There are actually worse things than physical or verbal abuse, and our teachers must also be protected against these “electronic attacks”

Today, because child protection strategies merit serious emphasis when we evaluate schools, it is easy to destroy a teacher’s reputation by making a passing comment about someone’s allegedly ‘inappropriate conduct’; a raised eye-brow as we mention the teacher’s name can result in untold damage. Gossip is not new to our society, but the power of technology has increased its reach many, many times.

Sadly, it is now such a common issue that many of us probably know at least one or two wonderful teachers who



suffered character assassination at the hands of disgruntled parents, and I am no longer confident that school systems will be as supportive as they should be about such issues. There are several reasons for making this claim, but I think that an understandable nervousness by system authorities to engage in expensive legal action might be one factor. Fortunately, teacher unions continue to champion members' rights, yet even they can do only so much to protect a teacher when vicious tongues have corroded a person's reputation.

One way to take out your anger on a school employee is to start telling stories about them. You could easily damage a staff member's reputation by telling a principal that your children have complained to you about an alleged deficiency in a teacher's performance and add that other parents are complaining about the same thing. No principal wants to hear that the staff do not have community endorsement, if for no other reason than because such news augurs badly for continued enrolments in a highly competitive market for pupil numbers. If several parents suggest that they might remove their children from your school, it can certainly impact on your sleep patterns during enrolment time. Even if we decide to back the teacher against the complaining parent(s), principals can rarely know at the outset how real is the threat they face.

It would be consoling to deny that such things happen, or to suggest that when they hear about alleged deficiencies on their staff, all principals would reject the common gossip and endorse the teacher. Sadly, this claim flies counter to a human trait that most of us share: we can never be completely sure whether the report we are hearing is true or false, and we become nervous about backing an errant colleague if the reports seem either plausible or widespread.

This problem might take on a further dimension if the parent making the complaint is also a member of staff at the school. In an ideal world, we would dismiss such scenarios as unlikely but do

we live in an ideal world? The larger the school, the higher the chance that one or two staff members might be so ill-spirited that they would welcome the chance to destroy a colleague's reputation, and that stark reality must remind us to reflect cautiously on any complaints about staff members, no matter how valid they might first appear.

It is interesting to ask how people can get away with such malicious gossip, but in fact the attacker is often able to take advantage of their anonymity – suggesting that the negative report they are passing on is someone else's creation, not theirs. "I have heard lately that ..." or "According to the people at the school social last month..." are great introductions to the destructive attacks on a person's integrity. Despite the specious basis for the story, the damage seems to be long-lasting; we have too often accepted that "where there is smoke, there is fire." If a parent harbours a grudge against a staff member, the potential to do evil is limitless.

Whether it is a colleague, a disgruntled parent or a member of the wider community who makes the complaint, we would be very foolish to dismiss negative reports when there is a chance that they might be correct. This puts a lot of power in the hands of the complainant. Such a situation begs the question: why have things reached this level?

Looking for causes is often a complicated exercise, as we know from our attempts to get to the bottom of bullying in the playground or classroom. We could argue that the world has descended into an unprecedented state of animosity or aggression but history shows that violence is not a recent feature of civilisation. To explain why such overt and shameless aggression is common today, perhaps we should study our role models.

It seems that every weekend we read more accounts of aggression and animosity on the sports field – and it is not only with the contact sports that problems arise. If the people whose activities attract so much of our time are behaving like this, why can't we? When we look at the so-called leaders of our society, we see more of these poor

models. The incessant and childish bickering between politicians, the venality of church leaders in questions of child abuse, and the unethical conduct of financial giants are other samples of poor modelling. It should come as no surprise that so many people are seduced by this amoral behavior – nor that this lowered standard might manifest itself among our parents (or, let's be honest, among ourselves.)

Where do we go from here?

When our staff are threatened, educational leaders cannot simply say "This is shocking!" We must draw a line in the sand and decide that the time has come for us to stand up for decent standards. We won't tolerate this sort of behavior from children, so why should we do so with people who should know much better? If school secretaries are suddenly afraid to answer the phone, if parent volunteers are reluctant to come down to the school because of the threat of aggression or of slander, if teachers are afraid to fail students because their parents are known to become nasty to teachers who deprive their offspring of high marks, we cannot shrug our shoulders and say "Things aren't what they used to be."

School leaders today can play a major role in changing the current angry features of society by holding up to school communities a standard of behaviour that refuses to accept the status quo. We can show our parents, just as we show their children, that there are correct ways to handle disagreements, and that they should use these. We need to effect a cultural shift that no longer accepts the bullying position so many people seem to use; instead, we need a co-operative, mutually beneficial perspective that leads to real communication.

I salute Dr John Collier, the Principal with whom this article started, and I commend his courage as a culture shifter to all others who share in the honour of being school leaders. I hope that his example will encourage further instances of such professionalism.

Dennis Sleight is a retired principal with more years experience than he cares to remember. He has also been a feature of *Education Today* for more years than he cares to remember



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