Are Teacher Bullies Infecting Your School?

Some of the meaniest people in a school building are those we put in charge of our classrooms. Unfortunately, zero tolerance of adult bullies has yet to find its way into the faculty lounge. See if these descriptions of bullies in the corporate world fit anyone on your faculty:

Chronic bullies “try to dominate people…In [schools] that promote competition, chronic bullies are…seen as ‘leaders.’”

Accidental bullies “are social fools…awkward and child-like…unaware of their effect on other people.”

Substance-abusing bullies “are very dangerous and threatening.”

Opportunistic bullies “are the ‘climbers’…capable of being charming and supportive…they know what is actually rewarded in the school” (Namie and Namie 2003).

How Adult Bullying Impacts Schools

Some people cannot wait to get to work so they may make someone’s day miserable. It’s a personal mission statement that can be intrinsically motivating. Adults do not have to be the actual targets to feel the negative effects that bullies have in an organization. One negative teacher can impact an entire school, and while all negative people are not bullies, all bullies are negative influences.

Much of what new teachers experience in some schools can be said to resemble bullying, especially by veteran teachers who feel compelled to indoctrinate new staff with stories of failure, frustration, and apathy. School cultures have unique ways of introducing new employees to the “way we do things around here,” good or bad. For example, bullying behavior may include withholding important information from others, smirks or sarcasm in the hallway, refusing unpleasant duties, and demanding the best-equipped classrooms. Surviving this “hazing” can fill new teachers with a desire to do the same with the next group of new teachers. This is what makes bullying a cultural phenomenon.

Another example of teacher bullying may take the form of a clique of teachers who unite to provide a bully-like effect. They may target teachers who offer up ideas or opinions they dislike at faculty meetings, deliberately ignore or withhold resources from them, or accuse them of not “fitting in.”

How Should Principals Respond?

There should be zero tolerance for adult bullies in your school. Their behaviors make their targets feel miserable, frustrated, and angry—attitudes that affect their relationships with their students. As you read through this article, I bet some faces came to mind. These are the obvious ones that need to be addressed, and soon, with a face-to-face meeting, pulling no punches, in private. This is what effective teachers do with students who disrupt the climate of the school; they are quick, to the point, allowing no excuses, but not in an embarrassing way. Unfortunately, many of those being bullied are too proud to discuss it. The only way to identify bullies is to open lines of communication with those who have witnessed or experienced their bullying behavior.

“Adult bullying is embedded in the competitive nature of our national and school culture…”

Confronting the Bullies

Once bullies are identified, the principal should take appropriate action. Namie and Namie (2003) suggest confronting them individually behind closed doors with a tape recorder to determine just how committed they are to their bullying behavior. Some bullies may be unaware of their negative impact, some may blow off their conduct as a joke, and some may feel they have a legitimate reason to disrespect someone else. A confrontation with the school leadership may make some bullies reconsider and change their behavior. Those who choose to continue their behavior despite your admonitions have self-categorized themselves as “chronic bullies” and their continued employment now becomes an issue.

Adult bullying is embedded in the competitive nature of our national and school culture. It would seem that bullies are those who cannot get respect the old-fashioned way, by earning it. The need to dominate others is something our culture regards as an artifact of success.

As a leader, the last thing you should do is to bully the bullies. Your behavior will be perceived as inappropriate by your staff, who will join the bullies in perceiving you as the real bully.

Reference


Steve Gruenert is coordinator of the Principal Preparation Program at Indiana State University. His e-mail address is easteve@isugw.indstate.edu.

Here’s Your Chance to Speak Out

Are there teacher bullies in your school? What can you do about this often-overlooked problem? Share your experiences and suggestions with other principals across the country by going to www.naesp.org/speakingout/.