

From: [REDACTED] on behalf of Committee, REPS (REPS)
Sent: Wednesday, 11 July 2012 3:34 PM
To: Committee, EEWorkplaceBullying (REPS)
Subject: Sub 141 - FW: Workplace bullying

For processing.

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: Wednesday, 11 July 2012 2:48 PM
To: Committee, Reps (REPS)
Subject: Workplace bullying

11th July 2012,

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT
INQUIRY INTO WORKPLACE BULLYING

To the Committee,

I have just read the article regarding this enquiry in [REDACTED] (Saturday, July 7th, 2012). I have decided to make a submission to this enquiry to express how I feel after 18 months of trying to survive in a toxic, bullying work environment in the Victorian State Education system.

I have been moved to write because I am struck by the irony that the enquiry is being held by the Department of Education and Employment because the Department of Education has very much failed to deal appropriately with bullying in the workplace in terms of myself and my colleagues and in other schools with which I am familiar.

I am a teacher with 25 years experience. In 2010 a new Principal was appointed to our small rural P-12 College in Victoria. From the day this man arrived he began a campaign of bullying staff, stated to school Council that he wished to rid the school of all "old and Part-time staff". Criticism, verbal abuse, belittlement, intimidation, isolation, onerous expectations, breaches of workplace agreements, exclusion, disrespect, back-stabbing, the making of unfounded accusations against staff, physical, verbal and written threats, including of dismissal and removal from positions of responsibilities. This occurred over a period of 8 months eventually leading to the AEU sub-branch making a formal complaint against him. The majority of teachers submitted 140 pages of signed documentation to the Regional office. Teachers waited a further 6 months for a decision to be handed down regarding their complaints. This finding indicated that 7 out of 10 complaints were unsubstantiated and that the problems in the school amounted to issues of communication and consultation and lack of respect and recognition of the Principal's role.

This process in itself was highly traumatic, involving investigation interviews with complainants, the principal and his supporters; some of whom had a vested interest in supporting the principal such as, in one case, the desire for promotion and in another instance access to resources and funding. In the end, teachers found that there was no one listening, that we were disbelieved and that the Region was supporting and condoning behaviour from this man that would not be tolerated if a teacher behaved, towards a student, in the same way.

The Region assured us that they would provide a Regional Level Principal to visit the school on a regular basis to sit in on meetings and become familiar with staff and students and to work with the principal to ensure that proper processes for such matters as recruitment, consultation, local complaints and communication are followed. We have found that our democratic and consultative community had become autocratic and dictatorial. The principal expects blind obedience; that staff should "think with one mind and speak with one voice". There is no room in this institution for discussion, debate or individual opinion. The expression of other than the principal's opinion is so unwelcome that it frequently leads to a meeting in the principal's office where one can expect to be berated in a threatening and aggressive manner without the opportunity to respond.

The principal appeared to have made his mind up very early that a group of staff were colluding to bully him and targeted this group and also particular individuals for punishment. The culture in this school is very much one where perceived "good " or compliant behaviour is rewarded and "poor" behaviour is punished. The contributions of those who behave well are publicly acknowledged and those who have a history of "misbehaviour" are ignored. Punishment may take the form of withdrawal of access to professional development, public criticism and humiliation (including by email posted to all staff), diminishment of roles, withdrawal of access to resources such as reduction of budgets and access to technology, blame may be apportioned to those individuals for such issues as poor NAPLAN results, exiting students, falling enrolments and veiled threats of being placed in excess (to entitlement) have been made. The majority of students who have exited the school have, in fact been removed from one primary class where the underperforming teacher is protected by the principal because they are in a relationship.

Some staff have joined the principal, and in typical, self-protective behaviour now side with him against the "known" trouble-makers. Some of these people continue to complain about and criticize his behaviour behind his back. The principal's behaviour has certainly damaged and divided the great team that we had. The very person who is charged with a Duty of Care to staff is the bully. The authority who say they have a Duty of Care to ensure our workplace is safe, the Education Department, seem to be unwilling or unable to act to protect their employees. Having the Education Department investigate itself is akin to asking BP to investigate leaks in their own oil wells. The process simply is not open and transparent; those who feel bullied have had no access or very limited access to those who are responsible for dealing with the issues that they raised, whereas the principal has unlimited access to them. We feel that they are simply not interested in our welfare or in what we have to say, that after we entered a legal process in good faith, we have been let down, have no rights and no support.

We did not take our action lightly. The treatment of staff by the Regional Office has added to our distress. Of the 10 who originally made the formal complaint to the Regional Office 1 has resigned, 2 have taken 12 months leave without pay, 1 is on sick leave, 4 are currently receiving medical treatment and counseling for anxiety and depression and all are actively seeking employment elsewhere. None of us is able to work at our best. We care very much about our students, this was the driver of our taking action against the Principal. We have been accused, as a group of being self-serving and of undermining the standing of the school in the community.

There seem to be enormous inconsistencies between the Teaching Act in Victoria and the AEU Agreement - the Workplace Bullying and Grievance documents - about what constitutes bullying and reasonable expectations. The Teaching Act seems to give teachers few rights and the Agreement upholds the Rights of teachers. Decisions are made subjectively and without independent investigation. We have been told by the Acting Regional Director that, "If you don't like it, leave." I felt that this statement showed nothing but contempt for the position we are in, disregard for the students we teach and condones a bullying Principal's bullying behaviour with more bullying. It denigrates the training, experience, professionalism and teaching talent of the people who were concerned enough to stand up for what we believed to be the right, just and fair way to deal with people.

The only possible action that will stop this man from being a bully seems to be civil or criminal action. He has shown through repeated breaches after warnings, from the Region, that he is unable to change his behaviour. He has not been able to admit that he in any way may have treated teachers unfairly. The one or two apologies he has made have made it clear that he takes no responsibility for his conduct eg. I am sorry that you became upset when I called you mentally unfit ...". He has smeared the names of teachers in our local community, educational district and region; reducing the chances of our finding employment in other schools.

I have grave concerns for the well being of one teacher involved. This man has had unfounded, vexatious and unproven accusations made against him of the most serious misconduct. They have not been formally investigated, the Region has very much taken the view of the students who made the accusation, and the opinion of the principal as confirmation. His colleagues have been accused of supporting a teacher who has behaved in a criminal manner. A kangaroo court has charged and convicted him without evidence. I have told the Regional Principal that I heard the students bragging about "getting rid of him because we hate him," this has to raise questions about the student's trustworthiness. I felt that I was not believed and no further action was taken to protect, clarify or confirm facts with the teacher, or in fact, with the students. This teacher's professionalism has never come under question previously and we believe that he is at serious risk of harming himself.

I have written much more than I intended, I feel utterly powerless, ill at the prospect of returning to work next week, grief at the distress of my colleagues and a great sense of loss that the happy, caring workplace I enjoyed no longer exists

and amounts to nothing. Most of all I feel utterly let down that the process I believed could protect me in my workplace cannot be trusted and in itself promotes and protects bullies.

I do not know what the answer is. For me it may be sick leave, a change of career, opportunities are on offer. What I struggle with is that loss of confidence in myself after 25 years of exemplary teaching; the institutionalised culture of bullying that exists in education that is impossible to fight against. This, I think, is largely because the rule maker is also the arbitrator. Professor Gronski supports greater autonomy for principals. Unfortunately this assumes that all principals are good and just people.

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]