

STEALING FROM CHILDREN: A GREAT INJUSTICE OF WORKPLACE BULLYING IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS

by **MATT SPENCER, Ed.D.**

Through the years, I have personally identified a small number of what I refer to as “pillar entities” that, in my view, exist to preserve and perpetuate what is good and right and best in our society. I put government, education, religion, healthcare, and a few others in this category. When the devastating malady of workplace bullying is found to exist within these entities, and flourishes in some cases, the magnitude of the impact is multiplied exponentially. One would think that such altruistic institutions that attract devoted, service oriented people would be immune from such devastating elements. But unfortunately, they are not as “one bad apple” is hired now and then. When workplace bullying occurs in these institutions, not only is the employee seriously impacted, but as the quality of service provided by the target diminishes due to bullying, the detrimental effect is transferred onto the lives of people these institutions serve.

For much of my career in education, I have been a human resource professional. For more than 25 years, I have been directly responsible as a Principal, Director, Assistant Superintendent, and Superintendent of Schools for hiring staff members to work at various sites or departments in the school districts where I served. I have always approached my work in selecting individuals for employment based on a philosophical perspective that developed from actual conversations I

had years ago with students and parents. I noted the answer they gave to the one question asked: “Describe the school you wish to attend (or for the parent, the school you want your child to attend) as if it was a person. Fill in the blank....” I want my school (or my child’s school) to be a place that is _____.” The collective voice of these students and parents was the desire for the school to be a place that provided an outstanding education in a caring, loving, accepting, nurturing, and encouraging environment. The parents and students wanted the school to be a place where the staff did not judge or limit students on what problems or issues they may have now....where they come from, their home situation, their socioeconomic status, etc. Rather, the staff should be able to see beyond today and into the future... what the student could be...and did everything possible to help the student get there!

The collective voice of those students and parents became the foundation for my personal philosophy that has guided my work as a human resource professional ever since. In the interview phase of any selection process, I have made it a practice to never ask a question of candidates about what they know and what they can do (the knowledge, skills, and competencies essential for success in the job) before I probe into their personality and character. I know from experience that the greatest school employees are the ones who not only have outstanding skills in their area of expertise, but also have the essential foundation of what I

refer to as the “heart and character of an educator.” If in the first phase of the interview it is found that the candidate’s character, personality, heart, and other essential qualities match the criteria mentioned above, then he/she continues in the process to determine the level of knowledge, skills, and competencies they possess. When I find someone with both components...quality character and outstanding skills, I hire them! In my view of the grand scheme of things, I know that if each and every person we hire in our school district is caring, loving, accepting, nurturing, and encouraging, over the course of time the school and the school district will become that way too.

In education, what happens in the classroom between the teacher and student is where “the rubber meets the road.” So, let me begin to narrow this down to make a point about the impact of workplace bullying on the loss of productivity in schools. Let’s talk about what happens when a school hires an outstanding teacher who becomes the victim of a workplace bully.

As I shared, I know that students (1) want a teacher who is caring, loving, accepting, nurturing, encouraging, etc... and (2) has the essential knowledge and skills so crucial to being an effective teacher. When I find such teachers, I know I have found wonderful, capable professionals who can’t wait to come to work each day and give every ounce of their passion, care, talents, and skills to their students...what the stu-

dents want, need and deserve from their teacher. You can envision how it unfolds as the school year begins. Within the first few days of school, the students quickly realize they are blessed with a teacher who is not only an outstanding teacher, but one who truly loves and cares about them...wants the very best for them...sees beyond today and envisions a bright future for each and every one of the students. The students and teacher look forward to class, they are never late or absent because they don't want to miss an opportunity to gather together, share, learn, and grow. These great teachers are they the ones that students throughout the years have voiced and written great expressions of thanks and appreciation for the impact made on their lives. You, I would be hopeful, have been impacted by at least one such teacher in your life. Even today, many years later, when you think their name and recall the memories of those learning experiences, a smile comes to your face and your heart warms. And if a teacher who touched your life in this manner walked through the door of your home or office today, even though you may not have seen them in years, you would warmly greet them, embrace them, and unreservedly ask if there is anything you could do for them. Why? From the day you first met, you knew in your heart that this teacher loved you, cared for you, and devoted themselves to being there every day to give you their best so you could realize your goals, your potential, and your dreams.

Each year, outstanding teachers such as these are hired for service in schools all across America. They can't wait to get to work in their classroom at their new school and begin the process I described above...loving and caring for their students and giving them an outstanding educational experience everyday! But it's only a matter of time when to many of these teachers finds themselves in the crosshairs of a bully; a predator that roams the halls of their school looking for a victim. The bully could be an

administrator, a fellow teacher, a custodian, or anyone in the organization. But the bully has selected a teacher as a target and begins the devastating assault on this unsuspecting servant of the common good. Day after day the bully selects the tactic, the place and the time to unload on the undeserving target in the hallways, offices, and workrooms of the school. Incapable of stopping the assault, the barrage on the target continues and the predictable effects of workplace bullying begin to be revealed and take their toll. The loss of sleep, nausea before coming to work, anxiety, hypersensitivity, depression and other symptoms systematically set in. The schoolhouse which was once a place of honorable service has now become a chamber of horrors.

Before the bullying began, this teacher would be there every day, eager to share the learning experiences custom-crafted to meet the student's needs. But to avoid the unbearable suffering that will be inflicted by the bully, the teacher exhibits avoidance behavior and does not report to work. All available sick, vacation, and personal time is used. And as the days, weeks, and months go by, the once high-quality educational classroom experiences enjoyed by well-deserving students given by an eager, caring, loving teacher slowly and significantly erode. The quality learning experiences the students once enjoyed degrade into mediocrity and ineffectiveness. As is tragically the case in 64% of the time, this once outstanding teacher, now a remnant of his/her former self is forced into resignation, quits, or is fired. Perhaps like so many others who have been bullied at work, this educational professional never teaches again.

The workplace bully in America's schools is a taker...a robber...a thief. The bully steals the dignity, self-esteem, confidence, joy, happiness, and quality of life of the targeted victim. As a workplace bully victim, I fully and completely understand the pain and suffering

one endures. But when the target is a teacher, a great injustice occurs because the bully robs the students of what they want, need, and deserve...a teacher who loves them, cares for them...who comes to work everyday and gives all that he/she has so that these wonderful, deserving children receive an outstanding education...the foundation of becoming whatever they want and dream to be! A great tragedy occurs everyday in America's schools as thousands of children are robbed by the workplace bully of the RIGHT to be nurtured and taught by such honorable, caring, outstanding educators.

Educators are constantly looking to identify problems and issues that inhibit the delivery of a high-quality education to our students. From my perspective, the workplace bullying phenomenon in America's schools is something we can and must do something about. Boards of Education, working in partnership with the Administration and staff, can and must take a stance against this growing workplace malady that is eroding the quality of education in America. The workplace bullies in America's schools must be stopped from continually robbing our students of the high-quality of education they deserve.

Dr. Matt Spencer is a veteran education leader and human resource professional who has served 32 years public education in Missouri and California. As a Principal, Assistant Superintendent for Human Resources, and Superintendent of Schools, he has championed efforts to ensure the schoolhouse is a safe and healthy environment for students to learn and for employees to serve. He is now affiliated with the Workplace Bullying Institute and Work Doctor®, Inc. as Senior Consultant to the Workplace Bullying in Schools Project.