

Contact your union

You have a right to respect and dignity at work. Workplace bullying cannot and should not be tolerated.

If you are being bullied, don't suffer in silence. Seek help from your personal physician and/or an employee assistance program (EAP) to address any bullying-related health problems. Give the physician detailed information about the situation at work that may be contributing to your symptoms so that the doctor can give you concrete advice on how to reduce the exposure to bullying. Track your symptoms/illnesses and bullying incidents with dates and times. You and your union may need that documentation to make a case for change.

Contact your union. Avoid being alone with the bullying supervisor or administrator or confronting the person on your own. Stay calm and do not rebut any accusations or engage in arguments with the supervisor. The union and your building representative can help assess the situation and give you advice and tips on using the contract and other district policies to stop the abuse. The building or union representative may suggest that a representative accompany you to meetings with the offender and then work with you to actively resolve the problem.

Remember that if you are being bullied, you probably are not alone. Encourage other colleagues and coworkers who are being bullied to contact the local, too.

For more information, contact the AFT health and safety team at 4healthandsafety@aft.org



THE SCHOOL NO BULLYING ZONE

FOR SCHOOL EMPLOYEES

“The principal openly harrassed and threatened me after I questioned his test score data interpretation . I felt humiliated and demoralized; then my union stood up for me.”

NOT JUST FOR KIDS

AS SCHOOL PROFESSIONALS, we are charged with teaching and modeling good social and emotional behavior so that students will thrive in school and act appropriately. We are always on the alert for bullying among children. To end the practice, we try to change the behavior of the bullying child and to help the child who is being bullied respond appropriately.

But what about the adults in a school setting? Federal and state laws offer no protection against employer bullying unless it is related to sexual harassment or racial/ethnic or age discrimination. Very few districts have policies on employee bullying or harassment.

Without clear direction and boundaries, administrators and supervisors, intentionally or not, may cross the line and bully school employees.

It's time we recognize unacceptable staff bullying behavior and the culture that permits the practice. School districts have skirted the issue by obliquely referring to such behaviors as “inappropriate management style” or “poor leadership qualities.” But let's call it what it is —“bullying” —and work together to stop the behavior.

If you are being bullied or have witnessed bullying, talk to your building representative or union representative

What is workplace bullying?

Workplace bullying is, quite simply, an abuse or misuse of power. Bullying behavior is easy to recognize. It is behavior that intimidates, degrades or offends a person, often in front of others. A person who is the target of a bullying administrator or supervisor often feels defenseless and demoralized. A bullied individual may be singled out by an administrator or supervisor for constant criticism with no concrete or positive guidance and support for changing the alleged shortcoming.

Other examples of bullying:

- Unwarranted or invalid criticism;
- Repeated unsubstantiated attacks on a staff member's professional conduct;
- Constantly giving competent people trivial assignments or tasks;
- Giving assignments with unrealistic or impossible deadlines;
- Setting up an employee to fail by overloading him or her with work;
- Blaming or disciplining without factual justification;
- Treating an employee differently than the rest of his or her coworkers;
- Swearing/shouting at or humiliating an employee;
- Exclusion or social isolation of an employee;
- Making the employee the target of practical jokes; or
- Excessive monitoring.

Bullying administrators rarely mistreat staff in isolation; they create a culture of bullying throughout the school. Typically, it is an environment of fear and intimidation that discourages trust, cooperation and teamwork. They set unreasonable goals and berate everyone when those goals are not met. They may deny publicly that the demand or stress created by this environment is harmful to achieving the goals of the school. Such a culture is often plagued with high staff turnover.

Bullying behavior on the part of administrators is likely to be witnessed by students. Sadly, those students then are less likely to be exposed to all the adult role models they need to strengthen their social and emotional skills.

Health effects of bullying

Workers who try to "cope" or "adapt" to bullying conditions in silence may pay a big price with their health. The problem is made worse if the bully recruits other staff to participate in the behavior. Victims then can become even more stigmatized and isolated, with little or no support. Research has shown that targets or victims of work-related bullying experience significant physical and mental health problems including:

- High stress much like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Unresolved, chronic stress causes physical changes in the brain that can lead to depression. Stress is also linked with high blood pressure and heart disease.
- Reduced self-esteem.
- Musculoskeletal problems.
- Phobias.
- Sleep disturbances.
- Digestive problems.
- Financial problems due to absence from work.

A demoralized employee is much less productive and engaged. Many bullied workers ultimately give up and involuntarily leave their jobs and professions because they just "can't take it anymore."

Does your school culture measure up?

Think about your school culture. A good school environment should set explicit standards or codes of professional behavior. The AFT believes that every school should have a bullying policy that includes a code of conduct (see box below).

The school leadership routinely should remind all staff of the code and model the behavior. Administrators and supervisors also must lay out clear expectations for staff, with positive and supportive feedback on progress in meeting goals. Criticism should not be abusive.

The code of conduct is probably not enough to eliminate bullying. Schools and school districts should have well-established policies against employee bullying that have reporting mechanisms and methods to investigate and resolve the problem without threat of retaliation against the victim.

Sample Code of Conduct

In our school, we...

- Treat each other with respect;
- Work with colleagues to achieve goals;
- Maintain high standards of work and behavior; and
- Promote the values and the aims of the school and implement relevant school policies.

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