

Principal Connection

Who's the Bully On Your Staff?

We don't allow students to control or take advantage of others, so why should we allow adults to do so?

Bullies come in all sizes. There's Linda, an 8-year-old, who uses her physical size and toughness to intimidate her classmates. Enrico, a spindly 9th grader, gets what he wants in more subtle ways; his quick wit and acerbic comments cause his classmates to defer to his wishes. Alice, the junior prom queen and captain of the volleyball team, controls who is allowed in her coveted social circle and who can only watch from the sidelines.

Although the ways these students bully others vary, the results are the same. Whether it's done with a shoulder-bump, a cutting comment, or simply a raised eyebrow, they set the agenda and they control. They coerce, marginalize, and dominate. Just the possibility of these actions from them is enough to influence others. Their peers have learned to avoid eliciting a negative lightning bolt from the bully.

Every school has bullies, but we know that by establishing expectations, setting the tone, and monitoring behaviors, we can minimize their influence. Consequently, teachers and principals spend a great deal of time and energy overseeing interactions in the halls, at recess or during free time, and over lunch. It is often during these more casual times that bullying takes place. Children need to learn to listen to and respect others, because when respect is the norm, bullying behaviors are minimized.

But bullying isn't limited to children. There are adult bullies in our schools, too. Mrs. Green, a 4th grade teacher, and Mr. Meddon, a high school science teacher, are bullies. They can be a bit sarcastic and daunting in comments to their students, but they really engage in bullying with their colleagues. Mrs. Green

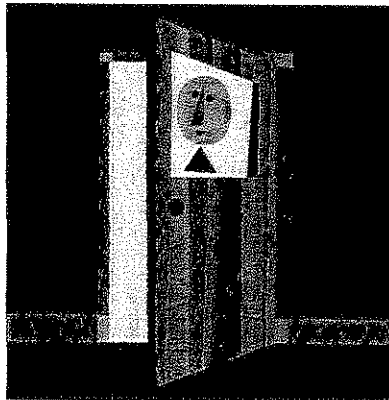
and Mr. Meddon each have very firm views on education, life, and how people should comport themselves; any deviation from their expectations is met with a cold remark, a snide comment, a harsh glance, or ridicule. Because they have no inhibitions about the toll their comments might take on others—and because others know this to be the case—Mrs. Green and Mr. Meddon are given deference and have an inordinate amount of influence on most issues. Their voices are loud even when they're whispering. It's not that other

faculty members respect their judgment; rather, it's that their colleagues want to avoid a confrontation and escape their ridicule.

This adult bullying—every school has a Mrs. Green and a Mr. Meddon, and sometimes more than two—is similar to what we see among those Philip C. Rodkin calls “socially connected bullies.”¹ Rodkin notes that socially connected bullies,

those who wield their influence through their social skills, are “hidden in plain sight.” That is, we see them engaging in these behaviors and we know that others are subject to their intimidation, yet we ignore it, tacitly accepting their behavior. “That’s just the way Mrs. Green is,” we might say, or “Mr. Meddon has a sharp tongue.” But why do we do this? We don’t allow students to control or take advantage of others, so why should we allow adults to do so?

Too often, we limit our supervision to teachers’ interactions with their students. We wouldn’t tolerate an acerbic response to a student, but we ignore the sarcastic comment to a colleague. However, that narrow focus ignores the negative impact that a teacher bully will have on faculty collegiality and morale. If we



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believe that faculty members learning and growing together is essential in school success, and if we believe that teachers will perform better when they are engaged and feel positive about coming to school, then we have an obligation to make sure they aren't subject to bullying from their peers.

Just like addressing bullying among students, reducing bullying by faculty members begins with intention and focus. We need to talk about respect being integral to all the interactions in a school—student to student, adult to student, and adult to adult—and we need to model respectful behavior. We need to make it clear to the teacher who makes a bullying comment to a colleague that such remarks are not acceptable. This conversation should be done privately, thoughtfully, and firmly. Sarcasm, rolled eyes, and loud sighs cannot be part of a faculty dialogue.

We need to be proactive, too. Faculty collegiality, teamwork, and professionalism need to be overtly addressed

in faculty meetings, in faculty communications, and in end-of-year evaluations. Collaboration and respect among teachers must be an expectation. Teachers who take the lead in working with others should be applauded, and those who need to work on their interactions should have this expectation as one of their yearly goals.

Finally, as you think about bullying behaviors among your faculty, take a look in the mirror. Principals can be bullies, too. Indeed, in some ways it may be easier for principals to use their clout to fail to listen to others, make cutting comments, and disregard those whose views do not match their own. Do we show respect for others' opinions even when we don't agree? Do we offer a voice to everyone? It's important to ask yourself, Am I meeting those expectations that I hold for others? ■

¹Rodkin, P. (2011). Bullying—And the power of peers. *Educational Leadership*, 69(1).

Author's note: All students and teachers described here are fictitious.

Research Says

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creativity and academic content knowledge are taught hand in hand. Without a deep knowledge of physics, all the creativity in the world wouldn't have led to Einstein's theory of relativity. ■

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