

What to Do When the Bully Turns Out to Be a Parent?

Janet R. DeSimone

Lehman College, The City University of New York, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Emily Poe, an experienced special education teacher with a longstanding history of amiable and collaborative relationships with parents, is encountering difficulty with a parent of one of her students with multiple disabilities. The parent is calling and emailing the teacher relentlessly, often using inappropriate tone and language in her communications. The parent is also threatening legal action against the district if her son is not given the schedule and teacher she requested. The situation is becoming stressful and challenging for Emily. She is unsure of the best way to address the parent's behavior and is highly uneasy dealing with the parent. Emily requests help from her principal, the director of special education, and the assistant superintendent of instruction, but they do not want to get involved and believe the teacher should manage the situation. This case study highlights themes of adult bullying, teacher-parent conflicts, and inadequate administrative support.

INTRODUCTION

According to a 2020-2021 national survey of violence (physical and verbal) against educators and school personnel, close to 30% of teachers experienced at least one verbal or threatening victimization from a parent, while 49% of teachers reported a desire to leave their job or transfer to another school (McMahon et al., 2022). Teachers also cited an unsupportive work environment as a contributing factor to feeling anxious (McMahon et al., 2022). Other research has suggested that teachers

encountered parental verbal aggression (May et al., 2010) and were victims of cyberbullying (e.g., received bullying or intimidating electronic or text messages from parents) (Küçüksüleymanoğlu, 2019). Although all states within the United States (U.S.) have adopted laws and/or mandated school policies to prevent the bullying of pre-kindergarten through 12th-grade (pre-K-12) students (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.), and school districts abide by anti-discrimination and harassment federal laws based on race or ethnicity, color, national origin, sex, disability, or religion, most districts do not have policies to address adults bullying adults. The attention of administrators and school boards has focused on student bullying rather than adult bullying in the work environment (Kleinheksel & Geisel, 2019).

While bullying is a common topic in educational research, nearly all the research focuses on student-to-student bullying. Much of the literature on adult bullying examines workplace abuse in general organizations, not specifically in pre-K-12 settings (Kleinheksel & Geisel, 2019). Even though adult bullying in the pre-K-12 arena has begun to get more attention, the existing literature concentrates on administrators bullying teachers or parents bullying administrators. Further, much of the literature related to conflicts between parents and schools and special education focuses mainly on due process disputes and does not involve rigorous research studies (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

One of the major factors impacting teacher turnover (for both special and general education programs) continues to be insufficient administrative support (Billingsley, 2004; Borman & Dowling, 2008; Boyd et al., 2011; Ingersoll, 2001). In fact, Prather-Jones (2011) found teachers' perceptions of high-level administrative support to be an essential influence on special education teachers' career decisions. Further, persistent work dilemmas often result in chronic stress and decreased job satisfaction and commitment, ultimately resulting in burnout (Billingsley, 2004). However, studies have indicated that stress can be eased when teachers perceive strong support from principals (Gersten et al., 2011).

The need for principal support is critical during teacher-parent conflicts or during times when teachers are mistreated. In one qualitative study of teachers who experienced threats from parents, observing administrators as "indifferent bystanders" was a common theme (McMahon et al., 2017, p. 7). Teachers believed administrators often reduced or completely dismissed incidents they had with parents or did not stand up for them, and cited administrators' failure to support them as making them feel even more victimized (McMahon et al., 2017). Bullying behavior has been found to thrive in such work environments where leaders minimize harmful treatment (Lutgen-Sandvik & Tracy, 2012). Instead of ignoring conflicts, administrators need to brainstorm challenging situations with teachers and talk through professional relationships fraught with conflict (Gersten et al., 2011).

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