

When does incivility turn into downright hurtful behavior?

# TEACHERS BEHAVING BADLY

By Chuck Waggoner

**"E**very day was like going into battle," says Diana, who felt as though she was being targeted by fellow teachers in her school. Layoffs were pending, and she was one of three teachers who were not tenured, any of whom was likely to be out of work because of declining enrollment.

Diana felt her colleagues were turning on her and making her life at school very difficult. When she walked into the teachers' lounge, she was met with sudden silence. Conversation stopped cold.

"Some people stopped talking to me altogether," says Diana, who believed that two of her colleagues were lobbying school board members to retain them and fire her.

Although Diana is not this teacher's real name, her story and the other stories recounted in this article are all too real.

## Incivility and 'mobbing'

When does incivility between teachers turn into behavior that injures careers? And what, if anything, should schools do about it?

Teacher incivility is not generally recognized for the harm it can do. Administrators seldom give a passing thought to behavior they may consider almost trivial. Jokes and stories about incivilities among colleagues in the teachers' lounge are the stuff of legend. If the word gets back to victims that they are the subject of malevolent gossip, they are usually told to just ignore it or to consider the source.

There is a fine line, however, between teasing and what has come to be known in the research literature as workplace "mobbing" or bullying. The problem is just as real and prevalent in schools as it is in any other workplace, as invisible and insidious in its way as sexual harassment.

Belittling or ridiculing a colleague may seem benign enough, but mobbing is an emotional assault. It begins when



an individual becomes the target of disrespectful and harmful behavior. Innuendo, rumors, and institutional discrediting create a hostile environment in which employees participate in malevolent actions designed to force the victim out of the workplace or otherwise make that person miserable.

Most school districts have formulated policies on student bullying, carefully defining it and detailing the consequences for students who do not comply. Districts also have sexual harassment policies for both students and employees, defining and delineating behaviors that are unacceptable and the procedures for remedying inappropriate conduct. But few if any school districts have clearly stated policies on workplace mobbing, primarily because it is not yet recognized as a problem in most schools and is difficult to control when it occurs.

Workplace mobbing by teachers is not directed at students and is not the sexual harassment of colleagues as such, although the potential is there for such harassment to develop. Mobbing involves hostile and unethical communication or behavior. It can be defined broadly as all types of mistreatment at work, as well as systematic, deliberate, hurtful, and repeated mistreatment.

## A growing problem

Workplace incivility is increasingly being recognized in professions other than education. In March, for example, amidst coverage of management in the space program as part of the space shuttle Columbia investigation, the *New York Times* reported that the employee assistance program at the Johnson Space Center announced a workshop titled "Bullying in the Workplace." The notice read: "Intimidation, harassment, and

manipulation play a big part in the work environment, and the 'groupthink' mentality often means that the bully gets away with this behavior."

A 1998 study by Christine Pearson at the University of North Carolina points out that, each year, 12 percent of all employees who leave their jobs leave because of rudeness.

"Incivility is not just a personal issue. It disrupts work patterns and diminishes the effectiveness of its targets and others," the study reports. The five-year workplace study showed that just over half of the 775 respondents said they were distracted by rude behavior at work and got less done while fuming or worrying about it; 28 percent said they lost work time trying to avoid a bully; and 22 percent said they purposely quit doing their best work due to incivility.

Schools are not immune to this type of behavior. It can happen for a variety of reasons. It may be that a teacher is seen as being too much in the camp of the administration. It may occur because of petty jealousy, different views of contractual issues, or job insecurity.

And it often intensifies when budgets are reduced and jobs are threatened, as some teachers believe that battling openly or silently undercutting one another is the only way to survive job cuts.

### **Diana's story**

With kindergarten enrollments down, it became apparent that one of the school's three nontenured kindergarten teachers—Diana, Linda, or Mary—would be let go for the following year. Although the three had a good working relationship, the pressures of impending cutbacks encouraged the formation of opposing camps, which led to rude behavior.

*Diana:* "I was the only nontenured kindergarten teacher who lived outside the community. Although no one said anything to me, I got the feeling that I was the odd person out. I would walk into the lounge and the conversation would cease, or a subject at hand suddenly got changed."

*Mary:* "I've lived here my entire life, and I've got a stake here. Diana may be an adequate teacher, but she really has not lived in this community. I have nothing against her personally, but it was difficult for me to look her in the eye anymore knowing that one of us would lose her job."

*Linda:* "We've worked together for two years, but when it became clear that someone's position was going to be eliminated, camps began to form. Unfortunately, Diana does not have any tenure and does not live here. We teachers, at least, felt that this was a major factor the administration should consider in making the decision. It was difficult facing Diana at school every day knowing I personally felt that she should be the one eliminated."

*Carolyn (another teacher):* "All of the nontenured teachers seemed very competent and collegial, but somebody was going to lose her job. I've known Linda my entire life. There was no question where my loyalty would be placed."

*Diana:* "I was terribly affected. I felt that Mary and Linda had outside-of-school communications with school board mem-

bers. I cried. I couldn't sleep. I felt out of balance. This situation blew me away. I just wanted to walk out."

*George (the principal):* "I felt sorry for Diana. She was a fine kindergarten teacher, as good as the rest of the nontenured people, but she had no internal support in the building. There was no community downside in recommending her as the teacher to be let go."

*Diana:* "I had to take three days off for some minor surgery in January. When I came back to school the rumor was floating around that I had a mental breakdown because of the situation."

*Carolyn:* "Rumors fly around schools. I don't know where the rumor of Diana's breakdown started, but I certainly heard it. She was very emotional before she took the time off."

*Diana:* "Staff members just stopped talking to me."

Although no one admits intending to hurt her, Diana felt emotionally hijacked by fear and anger—a typical phenomenon when jobs are threatened. Diana was seen as vulnerable, and others joined in against her, including the principal, who ended up choosing to do exactly what Diana's rivals wanted him to do: He fired Diana.

*George:* "When the decision was finally made to eliminate Diana's position, she asked the unanswerable question, 'Why me?' The best answer that I could give her was, 'Why not you?'"

*Diana:* "Nothing was ever really made clear to me. My evaluations had always been good. It just came down to the fact, in my mind, that I did not live here and everyone kept making that point. I lost credibility because I was not an insider."

Groups formed. Diana was singled out. The financial cutbacks became secondary to the mini-drama in the building. Because of how the majority of the other teachers behaved toward Diana, she could not function at her normal level and decided to take some time off after the cutback to recover emotionally.

### **Jack's story**

Mobbing can also be directed at members of the teaching staff who are seen as lackeys of the administration.

When a new principal at another school asked in a staff meeting that all teachers refrain from wearing blue jeans and athletic shoes to work, a few complied, but most were indignant that their First Amendment rights were being violated and refused to comply.

Teachers who followed the request were gently ridiculed or overtly despised, depending on how the "mob" perceived them to begin with.

"I'm not on tenure, so the paranoia is always with me," says Jack. When the principal asked the staff not to wear blue jeans, I figured it was best not to get in her cross hairs. Others teachers made fun of the fact that I would never wear blue jeans and often wore a shirt and tie. It got pretty rough for me and even became a union issue. I know that what was happening to me got back to the kids, because I overheard the comments that they made about the clothes I was wearing."

Jack, a teacher who was not particularly in with "the group,"

suffered through embarrassment and quit at the end of the school year. He says he felt that the normal pressures of the teaching position were stressful enough without the psychological trauma of being singled out for ridicule by fellow teachers.

"I would walk into the lounge and everything would go quiet," Jack says. "I thought, 'How could all these people just go along with this?' I felt very isolated, and I have never come completely out of it. You would think the other teachers would have understood my tenure position, but they didn't."

Jack's principal finds teacher mobbing difficult to comprehend. "These are all highly educated people," she says. "How are we supposed to teach the students about getting along with their peers if our staff can't do it?"

In fact, the students can also become the innocent victims of teacher squabbling. During a particularly contentious local union quarrel at another school, an aggrieved staff member entered the classroom of a fellow teacher and accused him of undermining the union position.

"I'm in the middle of a lesson and this other teacher barges into my room and begins to chastise me in a loud voice about something that the students had absolutely no involvement in," the teacher says. "It upset me so much that I had to take the rest of the day off as sick leave."

### How schools can respond

What can school leaders do to stop this incivility?

The first step is to recognize mobbing as a potential problem. It is not a joke that can be taken lightly. Principals might say, "It's better to have the teachers mad at each other than at me," but that attitude is hardly conducive to good morale. Mobbing should be understood for what it is—serious, malicious behavior with far-reaching consequences. It is devastating to the person who is attacked and demoralizing to the entire workforce, destroying trust, teamwork, and positive attitudes.

Once mobbing is understood as a particularly insidious form of emotional abuse, the next step is to take aggressive action to stop it. Here are some suggestions:

- Urge administrators to examine their own leadership style. Some administrators are not good at solving conflicts. Some use harassment to discipline teachers, have their own cliques on the staff, or withhold information from some teachers. As research shows, the administration sets the tone for the school.

- Train employees to identify the first signs of mobbing. Staff development should also focus on human relations, especially concerning getting along in the workplace. Many professional consultants can present sessions on this topic.

- Adopt a workplace civility policy that says certain behaviors will not be tolerated. These behaviors could include, but are not limited to, abrasive behavior, discrediting a coworker, acts of physical or emotional isolation, and verbal behavior that is derogatory, abusive, or disrespectful. Specify what steps should be taken when these behaviors occur, and make it plain that employees should not fear retaliation for reporting the misdeeds.

- Use conflict resolution/mediation with school employees as well as with students. After an incident occurs, follow up to ensure that the conflict has really been resolved.

- Select new employees not only for their pedagogical expertise, but also for their emotional intelligence, such as their capability of dealing with and managing conflict.

- Post anti-intimidation posters in the workplace. Say what is expected: dignity and respect. No exceptions.

Remember to have some tolerance. People—teachers and administrators included—have bad days. Personal lives sometimes get tied in knots. If an employee's bad behavior is a one-time aberration, it might be best to let it pass that once without too much discussion or documentation.

But incivility that is repeated and pervasive violates the right of every teacher to be treated by colleagues with a minimum degree of dignity—a right that is as basic as the right to be free from status-based discrimination and the right to safe working conditions.

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