



# *Abuse of Power*

MOST BULLYING PREVENTION IS AIMED AT STUDENTS.  
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN ADULTS ARE THE AGGRESSORS?

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**A CHERISHED BELIEF** runs deep in our psyches: a belief in the compassion of teachers whose heroic efforts transform the lives of students. There is truth in the narratives that support this view, but there is also a darker side to this mythos. In a small minority of

teachers, an ugly undercurrent of mean-spirited and disdainful conduct toward students also exists. This conduct constitutes a corruption of the role of educator and does enormous damage to students, colleagues and the public's faith in schools.

My personal interest in the phenomenon of teachers who bully has its roots in childhood experiences with a few teachers and coaches who waged a daily reign of terror over students. As an expert in school violence, my professional interest originated years ago

while doing teacher in-service training on bullying. While—like most trainers on bullying—I focused on abusive behavior among students, I also raised concerns about the conduct of adults. This usually produced a hush in the audience, followed by requests to speak with me privately. Teachers and administrators revealed demoralizing experiences of a colleague’s cruel behavior toward students. The common denominator in these narratives

➤ Enabled by inaction of school systems.

➤ Undetected by outsiders.

Bullying fundamentally disrupts the trust and nurturing relationships necessary to achieve any school’s mission. Most observers within and outside education would agree that fair and civil treatment of students is—or at least should be—embedded in the ecology of academic work. However, the opposite is true: The problem of educator-student bullying is compounded by a general absence of school policies and procedures written to handle allegations of abusive conduct.

Efforts to reduce peer-on-peer bullying have taken on the momentum of a significant reform movement in education. At present, 49 states have passed laws intended to address bullying; most include policy guidelines for schools. A huge volume of resources and training programs has also emerged as a lucrative cottage industry in marketing “bully-proof” curricula. Conspicuously absent from this literature, however, is an emphasis on how to address abuses of power by educators toward the students they serve.

To date, there are no national studies on patterns of bullying by educators, and only a few limited studies exist that begin to document the phenomenon. In a 2014 publication titled *Bullying Surveillance Among Youths*, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention acknowledges that its report “excludes abuse perpetrated by adults against children or youths.” Perhaps this absence

reflects the politically sensitive nature of implicating educators at all during a time when the profession at large faces myriad accountability challenges.

Several generalizations can be made regarding the patterns surrounding bullying behavior in teachers.

➤ Bullying behavior often involves the public humiliation of targets.

➤ There is typically a high degree of agreement among students (and colleagues) on which teachers engage in bullying behavior.

➤ Teachers often bully in their own classrooms, where students witness the behavior but other teachers don’t.

➤ Teachers are perceived to bully with impunity; they are seldom held accountable for their conduct.

➤ Schools generally lack a means of redress for students (or their parents) who register complaints against a teacher who has been perceived to bully.

When students are targeted by teachers, they often feel shamed and powerless. In many cases, they become unable to establish positive relationships within school. Teacher bullying can also have a contagion effect, indicating to students that the bullying of a particular individual is acceptable and making the individual vulnerable to more abuse.

Perhaps the most distressing aspect of bullying behavior in teachers is how easily it persists. Colleagues may know about the behavior through rumors or persistent complaints, but think there is nothing they can do. School officials may have reason to believe it is occurring, yet fail to act. Almost without exception, offending teachers mask their mistreatment

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was a sense of powerlessness and the conclusion that little was being done or could be done to mitigate the problem.

I define teacher bullying as *a pattern of conduct, rooted in a power differential, that threatens, harms, humiliates, induces fear in or causes students substantial emotional stress*. In determining whether teacher conduct crosses a line into bullying, a “reasonable person” standard applies. Quite simply, others render an informed judgment that the teacher’s actions toward students are neither legitimate nor reasonable professional conduct.

In order to address the phenomenon of teachers who bully students, the education profession needs to grapple with several inconvenient truths. In general, bullying by educators is:

➤ Rationalized by offenders.

➤ Normalized by students.

➤ Minimized or ignored by colleagues who remain silent.

## What Behaviors Increase School Liability?

Demonstrating indifference to or lack of concern for persistent complaints about a teacher's conduct.

Claiming to have investigated allegations without providing credible evidence. (NOTE: An informal discussion with the alleged perpetrator does not constitute an investigation.)

Failing to follow policies and procedures when addressing allegations of teacher bullying.

Claiming that there is no history of complaints against a teacher when documentation of such complaints exists.

Silencing students or staff who register complaints with threats of retaliation, or taking no action against staff members who are known to have made such threats.

Ignoring targeting of students based on race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability, religion, nationality or any other immutable characteristic.

of students as part of a legitimate role function, using the rhetoric of “motivation” or “discipline” to justify their actions. If accused, offenders may minimize or deny the conduct and claim it was a joke or a miscommunication. Ignoring the problem of teacher bullying compounds it by giving license to any educator who believes that he or she can act with impunity toward students.

Inaction supports a discriminatory and hostile environment that undermines learning and teaching—and puts schools at legal risk. But the shroud of silence surrounding teachers who engage in toxic bullying behaviors is unlikely to persist. Several lawsuits have been filed, and more are on the horizon.

I have served as an expert witness in a handful of cases centered on allegations of bullying by educators. In some instances, the school was seeking to dismiss a teacher or coach who engaged in a pattern of abuse that reached a crescendo of student and parent complaints. Often a high-profile incident became the proverbial last straw that could no longer be ignored. In other instances, the school itself had been named in a lawsuit because it had enabled abusive conduct through indifference to persistent complaints.

School officials have a duty of care to protect students; their failure to act despite notification of a problem enhances liability (see sidebar). But schools *can* (and should!) reduce bullying by teachers and staff members. Recognizing this truth and being willing to take action are difficult but necessary first steps.

➔ Write or adjust bullying policies to explicitly address the conduct of

both students and staff. Teacher conduct should also be identified in each school's code of ethics.

➔ Use in-service time to discuss appropriate and inappropriate teacher behavior, especially in the context of disciplining students.

➔ Establish a means to address complaints about alleged bullying by a teacher. The right to redress—a process by which grievances can be heard and settled—is a basic civil right.

➔ Track formal and informal complaints, including student comments on course evaluation forms. Allegations of bullying should be included in annual evaluations.

➔ Sanctions for bullying should not be limited to “counseling.” Attorney Alice Vachss ([alicevachss.com](http://alicevachss.com)) has developed a model school policy that includes a “Statement of Standards and Protections” to address abuses of educational authority.

For every teacher who engages in this abuse of power, there are many more teachers who care deeply and try to mitigate the enormous damage this behavior inflicts upon our students—and our educational ideals. They should not bear this burden alone. Policies can help. Speaking up can pave the way. ♦



### Toolkit

Intervening with teachers who bully requires skill and preparation. Use these reflection exercises to begin within. VISIT » [tolerance.org/abuse-of-power](http://tolerance.org/abuse-of-power)