

SUBMISSION TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO WORKPLACE BULLYING.

The following is a personal story about my experience of workplace bullying which occurred between 1996 and 2005., while I was employed as a teacher with The Department of Education.

I will simply tell the story. I have opinions about why this happens in workplaces and about how it could be prevented, but for now I will simply tell my story. It is particularly sad that this can happen between adults in schools, at a time when so much focus is given to bullying between students. Little wonder that children engage in bullying, when the adults around them behave in the ways I describe. My experiences are not unique. They are common and they continue to be so.

I am a teacher. I was granted a Teacher Studentship in 1975 and went on to be employed by the Government from 1979-2005, with two periods of leave during that time.

I have taught in 9 schools.

In 1993 I was transferred to High School. I was 36 years old. My daughter was three. I was bringing her up independently.

Up until 2004 I had taken an average of 3 days sick leave per year. The few times I was unable to go to work were mostly due to my daughter's normal childhood illness. I enjoyed very robust health, was energetic and efficient. I was very active. I played sport, swam, renovated and gardened.

Over the two years from 2003/ 2004 my weight dropped to 46kg, I was constantly nauseous, I had frequent migraines, I was short-tempered and teary. My concentration was weak and I had stopped sleeping through the night. I would take the dog for a walk and cry in the dark. When I woke at night, I would go into the garden to weep so my daughter wouldn't hear me.

The events that led to this change in my health are not easy to summarise and if I were to tell the whole story it would be far too long for this forum. Revisiting these events is very painful, which is another reason to be brief.

When I was first appointed to High School there was an Acting Principal in charge and there were many warnings from staff about the return of the Principal. I was told to 'watch out.' When I met him in Term 2 I thought he seemed okay. For a couple of years I was 'golden girl'. I could do no wrong - I felt valued. Then something changed. I had offended him in some way. I don't know how. He started to belittle me in staff meetings. I got on with my job. I was teaching .8. One day at recess I went to him and said, if he needed me to, I would like to return to a full-time load the following year as my daughter was starting full-time school. He turned on me, shouted, ranted, told me he couldn't keep accommodating my "ever-changing personal life". I was so shocked that I turned to stone. He told me I was difficult, that 'a lot of people find you prickly'. I asked who these people were. He wouldn't say. He suggested it might be time to pack my desk. I went off to Assembly, sat there in shock and then, as I returned to class a student looked at me and asked 'Are you okay Ms ?' I was just near the staffroom door. I said "Sure..I'm fine" and then walked into the staffroom and fell apart. Couldn't stop sobbing. Thought I would never stop sobbing.

I decided to be 'irrepressible' - to outlast him, make sure he retired before I transferred. It went on. There were lots of bad incidents - lots more tears. I decided I needed to toughen up.

Then he was retiring. I took some long service leave prior to the Xmas break. By the time I got back the following year, he was gone. I thought I had won a small victory.

Much later, when I sought assistance from the Department, the Grievance Officer said, "Oh, yeah, XXXX! We all knew about XXXX!"

The new Principal arrived and I was very much looking forward to a fresh start. At this time the Essential Learnings Curriculum was being introduced into Schools. The new principal had been placed in the school to ensure that the new curriculum was accepted and implemented. Many teachers had serious reservations about it. I was one of them. There were endless 'professional development' sessions about it. They said they were consultations but they weren't. They were indoctrinations. I didn't realise. I thought they wanted contributions. I think a lot. I engaged with the discussion. I raised issues, flagged potential difficulties, and asked questions. I didn't understand that I, and other teachers of similar mind, were seen as subversive. It certainly wasn't my intention.

I don't know who had said what to whom, but it was obvious the new Principal had no time for members of staff who had been in the school for some years. I had been there for 9 years by then. The irony was that the new principal saw me as one of the old principal's team. Ha! As if!

What followed was three years of hell. I'm not sure I can explain this to anyone who hasn't been a teacher. A teachers' reputation is their most precious possession. Up until this point, my classroom had been my haven. My teaching had never been questioned. The Assistant Principal in charge of timetabling made a joke once (!) that I was annoying because all the kids wanted to be in my drama groups. My daughter had spent some time around the school, and my students would say to her 'your Mum is so cool'. I was proud that she was proud.

In 2002 things started to unravel. On several occasions, students were removed from my class lists because 'there had been complaints.' Sometimes I was told the nature of these complaints. Sometimes I wasn't. I was never asked for my version of events/matters. The stories told about me were given full credit. There was no attempt to solve the problem. It was obvious that I was seen as the problem, but I wasn't doing anything differently than I had always done, with the usual self-reflection and on-going adjustments and incorporation of new ideas and strategies to achieve the best outcome. At one meeting with the Principal it became obvious that a student had been casual with the truth. I said 'Someone is telling fibs here.' And the Principal said, "It doesn't matter who is telling the truth ." I was shocked. If the truth didn't matter, I was at a loss to understand what exactly did matter and what Education was about. I was deeply hurt that the Principal would consider it might be me who was not being truthful.

At this time I was teacher in charge of Drama. I was not being supported in that role and I felt I was under siege so I decided to relinquish it. I'm pretty sure that decision was going to be made on my behalf anyway. I thought if I made it easy for them, they might leave me alone. They didn't. Instead they took my home group from me. I had had this group for three years, it was the only class who

had not had a student suspended in those three years, and I wanted very much to remain with them for their final year in the school.

In 2003, I took on the role of House Co-ordinator. Meanwhile the occurrences of students being removed from my classes continued. I did a good job of the House Co-ordinator role, but I was exhausted by having to watch my back. I decided not to reapply for that position for 2004. I decided I would just teach, refocus and fix things.

In 2004 the attacks on my classroom relationships continued. By this time my daughter was in Grade 8 and I became aware that some older students were giving her a hard time because of me. I had no choice. I had to apply for a transfer. It broke my heart. I loved that school and all it stood for.

It was during 2004 that the Principal called me into her office on a Monday morning. Over the preceding weekend I had spent Friday night and all of Saturday in the school, running a school performance for parents. I was exhausted. In this meeting, the Principal told me that 'many of the staff believe that you don't care about the students.' The earth gave way under me.

I don't remember much about the rest of that meeting. I went to my desk, collected my car keys and drove to _____, looked at the water and thought 'if I get in and swim, and keep swimming, eventually I will get too tired and it will all be over'. I had to focus on my daughter so I wouldn't do it.

I went back to school. It was Grade 10 Drama that afternoon. I remember thinking I had to be there, because we had to debrief on the performance. I went into auto pilot.

During these years I had sought counselling, but at this point I went to the Union. They were not helpful.

I applied for a transfer. I made an appointment to discuss my situation with the District Superintendent.. I knew I was too unwell to cope with a tough environment. I was sent into a tough environment and it seemed my 'reputation' went with me. It got worse. Even though I managed to encourage the Grade 9 and 10 Drama students to perform for the school, I could not get any support or acknowledgment from the school administration. Whatever I did was criticised, even in front of the students.

Throughout the years from 1995 until 2005 there were many, many incidents. The ones I describe in this document are only the worst of them. Most of them I could have withstood, but I reached a point of no return when the actions of my superiors undermined my professional relationship with the students in my care.

By October 2005 I collapsed completely, physically, psychologically, emotionally.

In February 2006, while I was on sick leave, I was diagnosed with breast cancer - DCIS.

I went to see the DOE grievance officer - no action. I was advised to accept the Ill-health benefit available from my Superannuation fund and then resign. I was advised not to attempt to make a Workers' Compensation Claim, as "it will only make things worse for you."

I was granted an Ill health Benefit from The Retirement Benefits Fund and I could have been signed off as permanently unfit for work on the grounds that I was mentally ill, but I didn't think I was and I didn't want to carry that diagnosis for the rest of my life. My illness was mostly physical, although the symptoms were psychological in origin, and I felt confident that if I was given time I would be able to regain my health. I wasn't comfortable with being written off like that. I knew that my poor health was a direct consequence of workplace stress and I thought it was wrong to take money from when it was the Department of Education who should have been paying. This was naive in the extreme.

I filed a Grievance against the Superintendent who had ignored my request for consideration and assistance - BIG mistake. It provided 'them' an opportunity to call me a liar.

I filed a Workers' Compensation claim - BIG mistake. This was very damaging. *Very* critical reports were written about me. The night I read them I thought I would stop breathing.

I filed a complaint with the Ombudsman's Office - BIG mistake. They couldn't see a problem.

I file a complaint with The State Services Commissioner - BIGGER mistake.

I waited until the Integrity Commission was established and filed with them - BIG mistake.

I spoke with Workplace on several occasions - no action

When the Workers Compensation claim went to a Tribunal hearing, the lawyer appointed by the Union attended but no-one from the Australian Education Union attended. They didn't contact me ever again. I wrote to them to tell them I was shocked by their lack of support. I did not receive a reply.

One of the worst aspects of this saga was that I was so alone and wherever I turned for help made things worse, much worse.

My life was destroyed. Last year I returned to study. This year I began teaching at the University on a casual basis. I am hoping to rebuild my life, but sometimes, often, the effort of it is just too much. I struggle financially and this has had a further detrimental effect on my overall welfare.

is a small town. It has been humiliating for me. My relationships with friend and family suffered. I was so miserable and so angry that I wasn't much fun to be around, so people stopped being around.

The absolute worst part has been the effect it has had on my daughter. She shouldn't have seen her mother in such a state. I cannot give her the financial support she needs. I've tried, but I can't.

It is a cliché, but I am writing this submission because I don't want this to happen to others. I know it does. I hear stories all the time, I see my friends and sit with them and listen while they cry and blame themselves and I tell them that it is not their fault.

Speaking at the hearing in was frightening. I fear for the effect that revisiting this will have on me. I feel like an idiot, a fool, a cry baby. I feel shame. I still can't really believe that this story is my story. It isn't good for me to revisit this, but I am grateful for the opportunity.

The Department of Education is an unsafe workplace. Bullying is so culturally accepted by the DOE that they don't recognise it for what it is.

At the beginning of all of this, I wish someone had said to me 'If you don't shut up and agree with us about this new curriculum, we will destroy you.' I would have shut up. But they didn't give me that opportunity. Teaching isn't something I do. It is who I am. I didn't just lose a job. I lost a whole part of myself. I miss it deeply. This feeling of loss will be with me always. I am learning how to live with it.

Thank you for your time. I think having spoken to the panel today may help, because it is the first time that I have spoken to anyone in authority about this matter who actually wanted to listen and who understood and cared.