

Submission to Inquiry into Bullying

21/9/2012

I taught for 33 years in Victorian secondary schools. For 28 of those years I held leadership positions – timetabler in three schools, daily organiser in two schools, English coordinator in three schools, level co-ordinator in two schools, senior school coordinator in one school, acting vice principal in one school. I also served as an elected member of school councils in three schools and on the administration committee in three schools. I held the top promotion position in Victorian teaching for 23 consecutive years, from 1982 to 2004 inclusive, first as a senior teacher (in two schools), then in one of the many pointless “career restructures” that afflicted Victorian education as an advanced skill teacher level 3 (in one school) and then in another pointless “career restructure” as a leading teacher (in two schools). I was treated in an unprofessional and bullying manner in my last school, Secondary College and finished my “career” in charge of making sure the Country Fire Authority checked the fire extinguishers. My health suffered and my income was cut.

I wish to give an account of the events that took place in that school and to suggest a couple of steps to reduce the likelihood of such events in the future.

Victoria had performance bonuses for leading teachers in the 1990s. The aim was to break the power of teachers to resist government attacks on their profession. It was a bribe for compliance with the system. Leading teachers would sign plans and the principal would reward them for achieving the imposed goals. I refused to sign such an unprofessional scheme. The principal of my then school, Secondary College, told me that she would have great difficulty in rolling over my leading teacher position at the end of my tenure if I did not agree and then abolished the position so that I could not even apply for it.

I had seen the writing on the wall before this and applied for eight leading teacher positions in other schools. I was shortlisted and interviewed for all eight positions. In the first five cases, the school appointed the internal applicant. I was offered the remaining three positions, and I accepted the first of these offers, from Secondary College. I turned down the last two offers, from Secondary College, even though they were closer to home and would not have required me to move house, for the old-fashioned reason that I had given my word.

The principal when I arrived at Secondary College was very supportive and went out of his way to help me in fixing what was the worst timetable I had ever seen in my years as a teacher. However, Secondary College had seven principals in my first two and a half years there, mostly acting. This is essential background to what follows.

In 2001, one acting principal, Secondary College, persuaded the staff to accept a curriculum structure which could not be staffed because she said no one would have to teach more than 20 48-minute periods a week. As the most-experienced administrator in the school (having been a school timetabler, a daily organiser, a

senior school co-ordinator, a level co-ordinator, a subject co-ordinator and an acting vice principal, as well as having held the most senior promotion positions in teaching for 23 years), I showed that it was mathematically impossible to staff the school with such a low teaching load. My unarguable facts were ignored.

The next acting principal, _____ could see that my figures were accurate, and the staff agreed to change the curriculum structure and increase their teaching loads to 21 periods. They did this in the last week of the school year, making it impossible to have a timetable ready before the end of the year.

I worked over the holidays to implement the revised curriculum and conditions package. The whole scheme was fatally flawed in lots of ways; e.g., the combination of a totally blocked timetable with almost all classes being four days in one week and three in the other, part-time teachers and time allowances that did not fit with the numbers of periods per class meant a large number of shared classes. However, I did my best to ensure the school could start 2002 with teachers in front of classes. I saved the school four teachers, or \$208,000 in teacher costs, money that it did not have. I thought this was something to be recognised, but I was misguided. I had been right, and the school administration had been wrong – this is not allowed!

At the start of the new school year, one week into his time in the school, yet another acting principal, _____ (who seemed to understand nothing about timetabling), accused me of costing the school \$75,000 and purported to dismiss me from my position as timetabler. I was replaced by an assistant principal, two assistant timetablers and a consultant – yes, four people to do what had been one person's job. I had the support of my colleagues, who clearly recognised the victimisation of the person who had saved the school from yet another administration-caused disaster, and I took the acting principal to the Merit Protection Board, which, having considered my many pages of evidence, ordered my re-instatement.

I was assisted in my Merit Protection Board hearing by an Australian Education Union official, but so was the acting principal. His AEU official argued that I should have been dismissed completely, suggesting that this union in fact supports bullying by principals in schools. Imagine that: the AEU arguing in favour of sacking one of its members because another of its members needed a scapegoat.

The Merit Protection Board upheld my grievance, but I should never have had to go through all that stress to achieve justice and even though the grievance was upheld, the school refused to implement the decision of the board. I had to lodge a second grievance against the school for ignoring the board's decision.

On the last day of the term, when I mentioned my re-instatement to the acting principal, he said, "It isn't going to happen" – even though it was also his last day in the school. The school did not re-instate me until I lodged a second grievance with the MPB over the school's failure to implement its original decision.

The school appointed a new principal to take over in term two. I met him in the holidays and he explained that he would re-instate me as timetabler. However, someone lodged a complaint against his appointment, which was eventually upheld, so he never got to implement his decision.

I came through this stronger, and the fantastic support of the rest of the staff in the school was a great help to me. The union sub-branch had its best-attended meeting to give me support of all the meetings it held in the seven years I was there. Everyone could see what was being done to me. No-one was fooled.

At the end of my five-year tenure, the then principal, _____, as legally he could, refused to roll over my leading teacher position. I endured the next two and a bit years, taking as much of my accumulated long service leave as I could, until it became financially possible for me to leave.

One consequence of this series of events was that I kept even more copious notes of everything I did in case I ever needed to lodge another MPB case against bullying.

There is no way to guarantee that intelligent and decent people will occupy every leadership position in any system, but the situation would be better if there was less genuflection to flexibility and more rigid rules about what time employees must be given to complete their jobs. It would also be better if short-term positions were reduced in number so that people had security of tenure to stand up for themselves. I was fortunate as a permanent employee that my job was secure even if my role was not. I pity any teacher on a contract who faced what I faced. Finally, systems need to have genuine consultation, not the sham that so often prevails.

Relevant documents follow in the order they were presented at the Merit Protection Board hearing. Those scanned usually, but not always, have the handwritten page numbers as at the hearings. Those which I can reprint from my computer do not have handwritten page numbers on them but occur in the same place as they did in the documents at the hearing. The backs of some documents were blank but were still numbered. These blank pages are also indicated below. There are also copies of subsequent documents.