

## House of Representatives Committees

Committee Office 21 September, 2012

Preparing a submission to a Parliamentary Committee Inquiry

Send to:-

As advised by \_\_\_\_\_ Quality Teaching Canberra I wish to offer my written submission to highlight my experiences of workplace bullying. I am employed with the NSW Department of Education and Communities and became a forced transfer to \_\_\_\_\_ Public School as an administration officer in April, 2011. I have worked in every role within the school system during my time with the department including laboratory assistant, library assistant, administrative assistant and in the hospitality area within schools.

It was clear from the onset of my transfer to this school that I was not welcome and have suffered workplace bullying and discrimination. I became so devastated whilst at home for the previous six months that after seeing Mr. Peter Garrett (Minister for Education) give a speech on the negative effects that workplace bullying inflicts on ordinary people I wrote to his office seeking advice.

I was happy to be validated on 4 September, 2012 by \_\_\_\_\_ with sincere words of advice and options that are available to me in a letter which advised that I should submit my workplace bullying complaint as part of the inquiry.

I walked out of my workplace on the 29 March, 2012 and believed that by lodging an official complaint through appropriate Department channels that there would be no doubt that I had been abused in my workplace.

My opening paragraph to my complaint states:-

“I wish to lodge an official complaint against the Principal of \_\_\_\_\_ Public School, \_\_\_\_\_, in regards to workplace bullying, harassment and the subsequent discrimination towards me by the Office Manager \_\_\_\_\_. These incidents happened during my period of employment in this office from April, 2011 to the latest incident where I removed myself from the office on 29<sup>h</sup> March, 2012. These events have impacted on me physically and mentally and have led me to lodge this official complaint with the School Education Director for the area. Since the 29<sup>h</sup> March, 2012 this Principal has also relayed to other Department Staff that I am not welcome or wanted back at the school. This, I believe, is unprofessional and unethical by the Department’s standards.”

I submitted the full details of my complaint to the School education director and I have attached the findings of the complaint as per her return letter. This school education director also stated during a sit down meeting, where I had to defend myself in front of the Admin Manager and the Principal who abused me that it would be in my best interests not to take this any further. She stated that if I did complaints would be brought against me. This statement by the school education director was another form of bullying just from higher up. I also received bullying from a back to work co-

ordinator from \_\_\_\_\_ office who stated “ go back to the doctors and have my workers compensation certificate changed, as medical practitioners were not going to tell him where I could or could not work.”

The union has recently contacted the school and I do not have any written complaints against me as stated by the director. I have worked for the Department of Education for over 15 years in the role of school assistant in six schools both high school and primary, on the coast and out west and have never had one complaint from any parent/child or staff member

I have been studying to complete my Bachelor of education of which I have 2 years left of study from an eight year part time degree which I have been completing whilst I work full time and raise my children.

The last paragraph of my complaint to the department states:-

“I believe that as an employee of the NSW Department of Education of 15 years that I am entitled to a workplace that is free of bullying, abuse and discrimination. I am nearing the end of my Bachelor of Primary Education Degree to teach in NSW schools and I am devastated that this type of behaviour is demonstrated by staff when the Department supports such stringent rules regarding bullying in schools.

I await your decision and advice regarding this matter.”

During my last teaching practicum I was made aware that a member of this school also contacted my practicum school to deter them from having me from prac. This was confirmed by my prac teacher who was too fearful of repercussions to complete her part of my complaint. I believed if she had that this would have proved the prejudice that I received from this workplace.

As a forced transfer I came to \_\_\_\_\_ Public school happy to finally be back working full time for the department; however within 12 months I have been on workers compensation for anxiety, depression, multiple medical appointments and reviews, medication and the use of all of my leave.

The problem is that, I was someone who believed that by doing the right thing and documenting, notifying and submitting the details relating to the incidents in this office that it would be seen for what it is – workplace bullying. In hindsight I believe I would have been better to have left like many of the staff before me and saved what was left of my mental health.

The department of education, and I am sure there are many government facilities, does not seem to take the issue of workplace bullying seriously. The fact that they believe that the issues can be fixed through inadequate resolution processes which make out the person lodging the complaint to be guilty until proven otherwise. Since lodging my complaint it seems that it is much easier to label me as a trouble maker, someone who needs more professional training and the best excuse given in my findings, that the principal has admitted that she didn't handle things well on that day!

My experiences of the workers compensation assessment by the insurance evaluation doctor,

I would have to say would be one of the worst experiences of my life. If there hadn't been enough damage done to me through the abuse from my principal, the interrogation I received by this doctor finished me off. I was taped and basically told that all my actions had contributed to the workplace harassment. His manner totally changed when he realised I was not his 10am paying client who he fell over with kindness, however when it came to 11am his fangs and fur emerged.

I am devastated and disappointed that a system that I believed in has let me down, especially when I have always held the department in such high esteem. Is it the fact that the people are biased in the area because they are friends with the education director; it seems that even if you are in the right when it comes to people's loyalties they will choose their work colleagues above doing the right thing.

I will continue to study for my degree next year. I am now behind with my units this semester and had to cancel my practicum due to illness. However I will continue to complete my degree as I am still passionate about education and working with children.

Is it the fact that people are allowed to get away with workplace bullying, that staff in the schools know it happens but will not speak up, or is it that staff the principal employs are loyal to the principal and not to the department? I wonder if I was just unlucky to be moved to a toxic environment? Or did the environment became toxic because I was not wanted – the words of the admin manager within the first two weeks of me starting at this school “ I am disappointed with the department for sending you”, when I questioned this they said that the admin manager was new.....

I would appreciate being included in this inquiry and I am quite happy to contribute with details and support in any way I can. I attach three documents to support my claim and look forward to your reply.

Yours sincerely,

School Administration Officer

NSW Department of Education & Communities

I agree to make changes that you believe may be appropriate to my submission. Signed

21/9



## THE FACTS

- The details below headed 'Related to 29<sup>th</sup> March' are the final incidents when I removed myself from the school.
- The first incident of abuse was when I answered a call from my son because my daughter was ill.
- I was discriminated by the admin manager who I actually sort support from regarding the principals manner. I told the admin manager that I don't tolerate bullying. She ceased the conversation when I asked for assistance.
- My teaching practicum mentor at another school was advised by \_\_\_\_\_ Public school, about incidents regarding me before the commencement of my teaching prac last Nov, this teaching mentor fears repercussions if she speaks out, She states she was advised not to take me for my prac, she was extremely upset and said that my teaching prac would be purely professional and that I would be judged on my work with the children in the classroom, not on my role in another school as an administrator. I completed a successful teaching prac at this school Nov 2011.
- I was isolated from other staff, abused about my length of conversations with parents at the counter, discriminated by the admin manager who stated that I make her cranky, that I had ruined her workplace happiness and that at my age I should not have to be chastised.
- Notes were kept on me and the casual lady whose position I had taken advised the admin manager that I had rolled my eyes behind her back. (This was actually stated as the complaint against me at the directors meeting of 13/8).
- Two medical practitioners, one psychologist and one psychiatrist have agreed that I have an adjustment fear with anxiety and depression due to my treatment at \_\_\_\_\_ Public School
- At other schools my studies have been supported with teaching and admin staff being aware of the pressures of study and more than happy to participate if they could. The department actually gave me study leave each year for my degree to teach with the department; however this is no longer available.
- I agree and have never denied that I answered my mobile phone at school to my children, and that another incident of abuse was due to my printing of a completed university assignment on a school printer. I did explain that I had not completed any of the work at school only needed a copy to read before sending and did this as my printer had broken at home.
- I have acknowledged everything in the meeting with the school education director; however her comments in the meeting about how strong I appeared I believe were inappropriate. I told her that was her perception and she had no idea how I really am.
- The back to work co-ordinators comments I believe are the best, to summarise she stated:  
"Just get over it \_\_\_\_\_ you don't have a leg to stand on, you didn't document anything, it's all too old, just have a wine and get over it! She said may be best to resign if that is what I wanted to do. I stated I wouldn't resign however would take leave without pay till a transfer moves me to a school where I am treated properly. I did document, I did advise within three months of starting and is convenient now when these staff members are asked what they said they said they don't recall.
- The Principal confirmed her abuse in two ways, she sent me an angry email after I left the office on the 29<sup>th</sup> March, as she was still angry that I had removed myself from the office and described my behaviour as unprofessional? This is after she screamed at me!!!
- She told the whole teaching staff the next morning before school commenced, that I was on leave due to her yelling!
- I understand the importance of rules in schools. As stated I have never had another complaint against me in my whole career of 30 years, 15 years with the DEC. For the things that I did at school such as answering my phone or printing my assignment I don't think I deserved to be

treated in the way I was. I have never retaliated in any shape or form and as of the 2/11 I have no more leave or money so I have to return to this workplace and back into the hands of the two people who I trusted in my workplace.

- The apology as stated by the school education director was part of the angry email sent when I left and the counsellor supported that this was “not an apology”. The principal has not apologised sincerely to my face since the last incident.

Relating to the 29<sup>th</sup> March, 2012 Thursday

At 12.15 (Admin Mgr.) left the front office to follow up an issue in the school for as a contractor had come to the counter. I informed that it was time for my lunch break.

(Principal) asked that I wait till returned before I left, during this time a parent came in and handed me a crispy cream donut in a bag and asked that the donut be delivered to the classroom by me because the parent did not want to disturb the class. I said yes and wrote the name and class on the bag. I went to the back fridge/sick bay room and got out my lunch, I had my bag of university books over my shoulder. said will you wait and I said that I would however I had food to deliver to the classroom.

was not aware that the parent asked not to disturb the class and as I believed I had time to have lunch I decided to deliver the donut at the end of my lunch when the children came out.

As I returned to the front office, returned through the door and I took the donut with my lunch and books to lunch in the teacher’s resource room with me. I am watched as to what time I leave for lunch and how long I am away from my desk; I must place a bell on the desk as I leave.

On returning from my break at 12.50 I dropped my bag of books at my desk and informed as I went back out the door that I was dropping off food. I walked around to the infant’s undercover area and presented the donut to the teacher on duty and she passed it to the student who was sitting at her feet, and she stated “here is a present for you The children had only just been seated under this covered area when I had arrived with the donut.

I returned to the front office where called me into her office, and she started to harass me about my whereabouts? This had happened previously in my workplace. She was extremely rude and was raising her voice and asked if I had just taken that food to the child now. I explained I had that I had taken it straight around after my lunch. She then proceeded to yell how dare I put myself before that child and have my lunch and how selfish I was. I tried to explain that it didn’t disadvantage the child in any way that she had lunch and it was only a donut, but she would not listen, she continued to yell at me about how dare I put myself first, she was screaming at me and I can’t remember the other things she kept shouting at me, as my mind went blank and I think I was in a state of shock. has seen me on other occasions give my lunch to children who have nothing, and I have gone to the kitchen and made lunch for children who have none. I would never deprive a child of their food; I was extremely upset that she thought that I would do this. I love working in schools with children and have nearly completed my Bachelor’s Degree in Primary Education so that I can teach, I have been with the Department of Education NSW for fifteen years.

I let continue to yell as I know from previous experience there is no way to de-escalate her shouting when she begins, also from previous experiences in the office. I returned to my desk extremely shaken and just sat, I put my head down and tried to get myself together. I looked across from my office to the other office manager who didn’t look at me, or try to come and check on me or the situation.

I felt sick, upset, overwhelmed, I actually wanted to vomit, I wanted to cry and I was shaking. I realised I was in no state to continue working that afternoon, so I turned my computer off and gathered my things.

had a woman from the Department of Education come into the office for an appointment and I

asked her to wait while I announced her, and as I did I advised [redacted] that I was leaving the office. I also advised the other office Manager that I was going home.

I had books in my car to return for the music teacher which I delivered back to her room with a note of thanks for her help and proceeded to find the Assistant Principal just to advise her of what had happened and that I was going home after the office situation. I couldn't find her however I was able to locate a library casual teacher and I asked that she pass this message on to [redacted] the Assist Principal. I advised this teacher that there had been an incident in the office and she said she was sorry and that [redacted] was a 'bitch'.

As I approached my car to leave I walked past one of the Kindergarten teachers who had been on duty when the donut was delivered and I mentioned to her that I believed there would be a problem because of the delivery of the donut. The other teacher on duty who delivered the donut stated there was no problem with the time or delivery of the child's food.

At this time [redacted] approached me and threatened me that I wouldn't be leaving the school till I filled in a leave form and signed it and I returned to the front office and completed this form and left it on the Admin Managers desk. When I returned to the office the admin manager said I could have done it online. I told her I am not allowed to leave till I do this. I then drove out of the school.

I had to pull over round the corner from the school as I was in such distress, and believed I needed some time to get myself together before I could drive. I rang my daughter and advised that I would collect her and to make an appointment with the doctor for me, which she did.

I returned home and rang, the Injury department at [redacted] the staffing department and the EAPS councillor for the NSW department of Education. I went to the Doctor's appointment and explained to the Doctor about the continual abuse I had received in my workplace and broke down sobbing. This Doctor was extremely helpful regarding the whole problem.

She commenced a workplace injury claim for bullying and stress and advised not to return to the office and gave me a Work cover certificate till 30 April, 2012. She gave me some strategies to calm myself and advised that this might take some time to be sorted out. My son rang the admin manager that evening to advise her of my condition and about the work cover claim.

On opening my emails the next day I was shocked to find that [redacted] had sent a very angry email stating the facts of the afternoon, saying that it was inappropriate for me to leave the office and the counter unattended, however she did apologise for yelling, but still stated that I was at fault. I forwarded this to the Department's councillor who stated that the email was not at all helpful, and written in angry language and that she had no right to contact me since the events had become part of a workers compensation claim.

I was advised by the Department to seek a psychologist appointment which I have done, and that a new lady from the [redacted] office who would be taking over from the [redacted] office would be in touch with me, at this time no one has rang me from the Department, except for [redacted] the day after the incident, who I originally contacted on the day of the incident. She informed me she was handing over the work load to a new person.

The officer from the insurance company has rang and gathered the details of the event and other events that have happened in this office. I explained that the problem of bullying had begun as soon as I started at the office and I had documented the events of the first term and sent them to [redacted] and the staffing dept. She had called me back at this time and asked me then did I wish to make a complaint, however as I was new I had hoped that things would improve. I have also explained to the insurance

company that I believe the abuse in the workplace will be worse now that I have complained and talked to people about it.

The problems in this office for me this year did not improve they have become worse, with other incidents of bullying by [redacted] During the first term I sort the support of the Admin Manager and she was very upset that I had discussed this with her and did not assist me in any way. She is very supportive of methods in the office. Please see the notes attached for the incidents of term 1.

During the year there have been other incidents, of being abused for being away from my desk, for talking to parents at the counter, for talking to other staff members and for stating that I had all my work done so that was why I was conversing with a parent. I have been abused for answering my mobile phone, to the point where my children text me and I check on them from the toilet or at the top of the school playground. I have never taken a morning tea break from the office as I would be abused for not being at my desk.

Other staff members have confirmed the abuse with some stating that they knew how I felt, and had been abused themselves, teachers have seen me in tears and other stated not to take it personally that I wasn't the first and that I wouldn't be the last, Others have stated that they will support me 100% and the Assist Principal was a person who had actually warned me about [redacted] and about what I should do and not do to set her off. She had told me to watch out; others had stated that they hoped I could deal with her. The Assist Principal and her husband teacher both from this school have left at the end of the last term. I was unable to have a lunch break with other staff being told that I was to lunch only from 12.15 to 12.45 even though the Admin Manager rarely left her office.

I have tried to endure the conditions in this office with very little support and no contact with other staff members, the only manager/assist principal who was a little helpful has now gone from the office. The Assist Principal also confided that [redacted] on various occasions had not been supportive of her and was definitely not supportive of her move from the school. I had sort a transfer from the office from the commence of my working at this school (17 days after starting) stating to the manager that she could sign my transfer for me to leave when a transfer was available and on this occasion she stated that it wasn't necessary and was friendly with me asking about my degree. [redacted] had done this to me on a few occasions where she had been abusive and would be uncomfortably over-friendly the next day.

I had advised the admin manager about the bullying and stated that I don't accept being spoken to in that way; however she condoned [redacted] behaviour and has basically isolated me because she said she was disappointed with department for sending me. She has also intimidated me and ran me down in the office.

[redacted] did advise the teachers in the staff meeting on the following morning after the event that I was on stress leave due to her yelling at me. The teaching staff is aware of the problems in the office, however due to a large percentage of casual staff no one is prepared to stand up as they will be taken off the casuals list. Teaching staff have advised me of a long history of transfers, and staff on stress sick leave due to incidents related to the Principal. One staff member has rang and stated that she is prepared to confirm her own abuse from the Principal, other staff members stated that if they didn't need to the money they too would complain.

I have suffered bad dreams, broken sleep, waking in tears and headaches since this last incident and believe that the bullying I have suffered in this office is having a detrimental effect on my health, my family and my studies. The NSW Department of Education has advised me to seek strategies from the psychologist to deal with bullying in the workplace.



