

A DIFFERENT PATH – HOW LEADERS AVOID THESE ISSUES

As we reconsidered Ms. Gonzales's experiences with "The Bulldog," we have been focusing on how Ms. Owens, the school principal, could best deal with the leadership challenges that the situation presented.

But what about a different approach: a proactive approach. What could Ms. Owens have done weeks, months, or years earlier to have avoided this crisis altogether?

Part of the answer lies in strategies we have already discussed: Establish and maintain a culture in which student mistreatment is unwelcome and not tolerated. Encourage members of the learning community to report issues quickly. But as the saying goes, hindsight is 20/20 – it's easy to spot the train after it hits you.

Here are some pieces of specific and tactical advice from experienced educational leaders, on how they would have avoided "the Bulldog crisis":

- Remember that there are three kinds of relationships in a school building: student-to-student, adult-to-adult, and student-to-adult. For success, all three of those relationships need to be healthy and encouraging. Leaders can embed that goal in what we do every day, and use that goal as a guide for how to be proactive.
- Think of the culture you are building not as a set of rules, but as beliefs that there is no other way you can imagine doing things.
- You may find it easier as a leader to be proactive and reinforce a culture of professionalism by simply considering why we have schools: it's not about creating jobs for adults; it's about educating children in an environment where they feel safe and comfortable, so it's easier for them to learn.
- "Mean teachers" are often given those students who are deemed behavioral problems. When that happens, emotional insults or psychological abuse aimed at students are sometimes justified as a teaching style that has its place in the schooling environment. Be careful not to make this kind of "deal with the devil."
- Look for the "Bulldogs" in your learning community: the educators who are problems waiting to happen. Seek them out; counsel them; and if necessary, take proactive measures.

- Beware of times when you defer or perpetuate an issue, rather than confronting it directly. The culture that Ms. Gonzales encountered in her school came from the leaders' failure to confront what was obviously wrong.
- Help educators realize that they face a challenge that is shared by other learned professionals: Understanding the power imbalance that is inherent within all fiduciary relationships.
- As a leader, part of your fiduciary duty is to tell superiors, including the school board, things they don't want to hear. When that happens, you are duty-bound to speak up – even though those to whom you report may not be part of your profession, and even though you may suffer for it.
- After educators bring you bad news or a good suggestion for a change, follow up! Make sure they see that their comment mattered and led to real action.
- Be especially careful to model the importance of listening to educators like Ms. Gonzales – newcomers who have a different perspective.
- Set up mechanisms to help you see issues in a "community context," such as teacher mentoring and support groups, or community councils. These groups can then be resources to help you decide what leadership actions to take, and avenues for following-up and reporting back.