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## An Examination of Adult Bullying in the K-12 Workplace: Implications for School Leaders

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## ***An Examination of Adult Bullying in the K-12 Workplace: Implications for School Leaders***

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School administrators and school boards have spent considerable time and energy addressing student bullying in K-12 schools, and rightfully so; however, less attention has been directed toward the issue of workplace bullying among school personnel in K-12 schools. All states now have laws (and/or require school districts to adopt policies) to prevent and resolve verbal, physical and/or cyber bullying directed towards children in schools (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). This has served to heighten awareness of the devastating effects bullying has on children and the importance of proactively addressing it in schools. Student bullying, however, is not the only form of bullying that takes place in schools. "Bullying can occur anywhere in a school and can be perpetrated by anyone in that school. Bullies can be students or adults" (Parsons, 2005, p. 38). Discussing the differences between bullying of students in schools and workplace bullying in schools, Badzmirowski (2016) noted that "both school and workplace bullying can result in devastating consequences for targets, schools, organizations, and the perpetrators themselves" (para. 15). Whether student bullying or adult bullying, the negative impact on both the target and the workplace/learning environment can be significant for school leaders and stakeholders.

Understanding the nature and extent of adult bullying in K-12 schools is somewhat challenging as there is relatively little research directly on point, as opposed to the more general body of research on workplace bullying. As a result, this study was conducted to quantify the prevalence and characteristics of adult-on-adult bullying in the school workplace. Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are made to help school leaders provide a safe, non-threatening environment for all members of the school community.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Greenberg's (2007) theory of organizational justice has been used to advance adult bullying research in the general workplace. The term *organizational justice* broadly describes the study of people's perceptions of fairness in organizations (Greenberg & Cropanzano, 2001). More specifically, Greenberg outlined three domains of organizational justice: 1) *Distributive Justice*—The perceived fairness of the distribution of rewards and resources between parties; 2) *Procedural Justice*—The perceived fairness of the methods and procedures used as the basis for making decisions; and 3) *Interactional Justice*—The perceived fairness of the interpersonal treatment accorded others in the course of communicating with them. Bies (2001) further developed the domain of interactional justice into four categories: derogatory judgments, deception, invasion of privacy, and disrespect (p. 101). Bies utilized these four categories to study the interpersonal treatment and social interaction of people within organizations, which included the issue of adult-on-adult bullying. Greenberg's theory of organizational justice and Bies' four categories of interactional justice were used to frame this study of adult-on-adult bullying in the K-12 workplace.

## **Background Literature**

While there is an abundance of research related to student-on-student bullying in schools, there is a gap in the literature regarding adult-on-adult bullying in the K-12 workplace. Only a limited number of such studies exist. As a result, much of the background literature reviewed herein consists of studies conducted to examine the occurrence and ramifications of adult bullying in the general workplace. For example, studies show that up to one-third of adults experience bullying in their workplace (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007; Namie & Namie, 2009; Workplace Bullying Institute, 2010), resulting in a profound effect on the target's life and career (Namie, 2014; Namie & Namie, 2009; National Education Association, 2012; Workplace Bullying Institute, 2007). The effects of workplace bullying often play out in the personal life of the target. Namie & Namie (2000), Von Bergen, Zavaletta, and Soper (2006), and the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries (2008) reported physical, mental, and psychosomatic health symptoms in targets that may persist for years, and the Workplace Bullying Institute (2007) reported 45% of targets had stress-related health problems. To state that adult bullying is a significant issue in the workplace is an understatement.

### **What is Adult Bullying?**

There is a consensus among practitioners and academics that bullying is the repeated, persistent, nonphysical mistreatment of a person that threatens the psychological integrity, safety, and health of the target (Namie & Namie, 2009). Keashly (2010) described workplace bullying as "persistent relational aggression" (p. 18). Duffy (2009) identified a list of examples describing the phenomenon of bullying in the workplace, including spreading false information about a worker, failing to correct false information, spreading malicious gossip, discrediting a person's work performance, making personal character attacks, minimizing job-related competencies and exaggerating job-related limitations, isolating a worker physically or by not including them in communication loops required to do their jobs, or belittling them. According to Gibbs (2007), bullying behavior may also include nonverbal actions directed at the target such as crude gestures, eye rolling, and head shaking.

Adult bullying can be a nearly invisible, non-physical, sub-lethal source of workplace violence. Namie (2003) described bullying as mostly covert psychological violence. Bullying, either in the form of verbal assaults or actions taken against the target to render them unproductive and unsuccessful, implies the bully's desire to control the target. Davenport, Schwartz, and Elliott (1999) identified additional factors that occur with frequency and in various combinations to describe what they call the mobbing syndrome: assaults on the dignity, integrity, credibility, and professional competence of employees; negative, humiliating, intimidating, abusive, malevolent, and controlling communication; portraying the victimized person as being at fault; engineered to discredit, confuse, intimidate, isolate, and force the person into submission; committed with the intent to force the person out (p. 41). Although all bullying is reprehensible, it is important to note that not all bullying is equal in the eyes of the law.

## Bullying Versus Harassment

Bullying is different from harassment. *Harassment* is legally defined as discrimination against a protected class such as race, sex, or disability (Washington State Department of Labor & Industry, 2008). All harassment is bullying, but not all bullying is harassment. Namie (2003) pointed out that bullying is not illegal, which makes it easy for society and organizations to ignore, even though it is "three times more prevalent than its better-recognized, illegal forms" (p. 2) of mistreatment. Much of what constitutes adult bullying does not reach the threshold of harassment; nevertheless, adult bullying does not have to be illegal to have a tremendously adverse impact on workplace culture.

## Culture of the Workplace

Several organizational studies have examined the factors that contribute to workplace bullying and abuse. For example, Duffy (2009) described how organizations sometimes perpetuate bullying through inaction or inadequate response. Duffy also observed that workplace abuse is not always aimed in one direction (i.e., top-down) but can also be multidirectional within an organization. Lutgen-Sandvik and Tracy (2012) noted that bullying manifests itself in organizations where leaders disregard or minimize the mistreatment of workers. Hodson, Roscigno, and Lopez (2006) also concluded that job insecurity and organizational practices create chaotic work environments that allow for the substitution of bullying for more civil interactions. Keashly (2010) examined the systemic nature of bullying within organizations and how an organization's structure and processes "play pivotal roles in whether and how bullying is manifested" (p. 17). Keashly (2010) observed that "the systemic nature of bullying ... has researchers and professionals calling for organizational leaders and managers to take responsibility for leading the efforts in prevention and management of workplace bullying" (p. 17). Other studies underscore the incentive employers have to confront adult bullying based on the havoc it creates within the organization.

In a study conducted to examine the adverse impact adult bullying has on workplace productivity, Waggoner (2003) concluded that bullying disrupts work patterns and the effectiveness of targets and others within an organization. Similarly, Pearson, Andersson, and Porath (2000) reported on their survey results which showed that, out of 775 responses, incivility distracted over 50% of employees at work, and those employees completed less work as a result; 28% reported they lost work time trying to avoid a bully; and 22% reported not doing their best work due to workplace incivility. Research conducted by Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) revealed the lengths to which targets will attempt to resist bullying in ways that can be disruptive to the workplace. Quitting or transferring to other departments is often the first line of resistance, followed by joining with coworkers to develop a collective voice and provide mutual advocacy. Resisters developed influential allies, filed grievances, and documented bullying incidents. Subversive disobedience, labor withdrawal, and working-to-rule provided further avenues for resistance.

Unfortunately, research also indicates that reporting adult bullying behavior up the organizational chain seldom brings the relief one might expect. One study found that when bullying behavior is reported to a bully's manager, targets received positive help in only 18% of

cases, but in 42% of reported cases, management responses actually made the situation worse, and in 40% of cases, management chose not to provide any response at all (Namie, 2003). Similarly, the same study found that when targets reported cases to their human resources department, only 17% received positive help; in 32% of cases, the situation got worse; and in 51% of the cases, HR departments did nothing (Namie, 2003). Namie, Namie, and Lutgen-Sandvik (2009) astutely reflected that, "Doing nothing is not a neutral response to when an individual asks for relief" (p. 12). Worse yet, some managers respond in a way that compounds the problem. Hout (2016) provided an example of the dilemma many targets of workplace bullying face: "You might believe that if you report the workplace bullying to management they will see that it is wrong and is undermining the productivity of the workplace. In most cases management does not thank you. Instead they attack you and join with the bully" (Learn How To section, para. 2).

Bullying not only affects the target but also negatively affects employees witnessing the workplace abuse. Lutgen-Sandvik et al. (2007) conducted research with non-bullied employees who witnessed bullying within an organization and results showed elevated negativity, stress, decreased work satisfaction, and decreased rating of their work experiences. This research provided insight into the broader implications of workplace bullying for organizations and the impact of bullying on workgroups, thus pointing out that "bullying is not simply an interpersonal issue, but is an organizational dynamic that impacts all who are exposed" (Lutgen-Sandvik et al., 2007, p. 855).

Employers must consider the impact of negative emotional behavior on productivity and be willing to change the rules (or in some cases enforce existing rules) to stop bullying (Namie, 2003). When employers recognize that bullies create toxic work environments, drive out talented employees, create high turnover, increase health premiums due to work-related stress, make recruitment and retention difficult, and negatively impact the employer's reputation, policy development needs to follow. Salin (2003) concluded that if organizations lack a workplace bullying policy and provide no monitoring of, or punishment for, bullying behavior, bullying becomes acceptable behavior within the organization.

## **Studies in K-12**

Even though educators have experience and training in dealing with student bullying, it was not until 2009 that the Sioux City Community School District in Iowa became the first school district in the United States to implement a comprehensive anti-bullying policy and system for teachers and staff (Namie et al., 2009). The policy (Sioux City Community Schools, 2015) defined adult bullying behavior and listed consequences for violating the policy (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2010). The district developed teams to educate all employees about bullying, create a school culture intolerant of bullying among adults, and to model appropriate behavior for students. Namie et al. (2009) importantly observed that, "It is a logical step to see that the quality of interpersonal relationships among the adults is the context for student behavior or misconduct" (p. 14). In other words, if schools want to tackle the important issue of student bullying, then it behooves school leaders to ensure that adult interactions provide positive models for students to emulate.

Although there are limited studies examining adult bullying in K-12 workplaces, it would appear that adult bullying is just as prevalent in the K-12 environment as it is in the more generalized workplace in spite of the advanced training many K-12 employees have regarding the issue of student bullying. Hall's (2005) research showed that teachers in K-12 schools, even though trained in identifying student bullying, were reluctant to report adult bullying and often viewed being the target as their own fault. Like their counterparts in other helping professions such as nursing and counseling, teachers targeted by bullies were self-confident, conscientious, and skillful before the bullying started; however, teachers reported their health suffered while trying to comply with overwhelming demands and coping with the workplace abuse directed toward them (Hall, 2005). Interestingly, Hall also reported that while the bullied teachers tried to figure out what happened and how to correct the situation, they felt emotional distress and trapped by their inability to transfer easily to another school district.

One study in particular revealed the devastating consequences of adult bullying in the K-12 workplace. Gibbs (2007) interviewed teachers who had a strong commitment to and passion for teaching to determine the aftermath of workplace bullying on their teaching ability, as well as their ability to locate another position if fired or if they had left their position voluntarily. Gibbs (2007) concluded that bullying of teachers by teachers left the target with a sense of powerlessness, high levels of stress, negative impacts on job performance, and long-term emotional effects. Targets indicated a lack of administrative support after they reported the bullying, sabotage and manipulative behavior by the bully, jealousy of the target from the bully, verbal and non-verbal abuse, and the bullying teachers' desire for power and control.

Another study analyzed and described the effects bullying has on teachers when the perpetrator is the building principal (Blase & Blase, 2003a, 2003b). Blase and Blase found that bullying principals' direct and indirect behavior toward teachers caused fear, trapped and isolated teachers, damaged health and reputations, and caused problems within the school environment and in the personal life of the bullied target. Teachers who complained of mistreatment were subjected to "vicious methods to suppress, punish, and intimidate them" (Blase & Blase, 2003a, p. 75).

Many times, the adult bully in a K-12 workplace is a fellow teacher. Malahy (2015) studied the frequency, demographic factors, and possible K-12 workplace policies (or lack thereof) that inadvertently contribute to teacher-on-teacher bullying in a number of Illinois schools. Malahy's mixed methods research results showed that 18.9% of teachers surveyed indicated they had been bullied in the past six months, and 72.6% of teachers had observed teacher bullying behavior in their schools. Of all the schools examined in this study only one school district had a workplace bullying policy.

In another look at adult bullying among peers, Mazzarella's (2018) qualitative study investigated the reported experiences of adult-on-adult bullying among certified school professionals in New Jersey K-12 public schools. Interviews conducted with targets of adult bullying were analyzed to focus on how bullies bully, the psychological and career impact of bullying on the target, the support or lack of support experienced by those bullied, and the characteristics of school and school district cultures. Mazzarella found that in spite of a focus on student bullying in schools, "little attention is paid to bullying among school adults; that there

were few, if any, persons to whom the target could safely speak; and that the power of the bullies was a significant factor” (p. 171). Mazzerall’s findings reinforce the conclusions of previous studies that indicate adult bullying is a formidable issue in the K-12 workplace and is often overlooked.

Examining the impact of the bullying culture in schools, Parsons (2005) observed that, "Adult bullies often attempt to undermine and subvert the work of the most talented, creative, independent, and self-assured teachers on staff, without regard to how it is affecting the school" (p. 47). Parsons concluded that the problem of student bullying will not be resolved until school boards, school administrators, teachers, parents, and students work together to eradicate bullying at all levels. Interestingly, while Parsons emphasized that "boards of education and their designated school managers...share the responsibility for ensuring that their schools are bully-free" (p. 77), he also acknowledged that "school boards are as prone to bullying as any individual; only the methods differ" (p. 81). Such findings underscore the complexity of this issue in the K-12 workplace.

Some have looked to unions and contract language to address the issue of adult bullying in K-12 schools. For example, Hall (2005) suggested teachers approach their union representatives with complaints involving workplace abuse and bullying but recognized that not all teachers have union representation. Hall urged unions to advocate for safe workplaces and support anti-bullying legislation. The National Education Association (2012) also suggested contacting local union representatives for bullying assistance but recognized that no federal or state law offers protection against adult workplace bullying. Modeling what can be done to address this issue at the bargaining table, the Winchester Massachusetts Education Association (2013) approved contract language stating, "Inappropriate forms of communication, including but not limited to bullying, demeaning, sarcastic or unprofessional comments with/to a staff member will not be tolerated," and added that, "no administrator shall demean, bully, reprimand, or otherwise speak about a personal or professional matter regarding a staff member to another staff member or in the presence of another staff member or in any public forum" (Article 1, Sec. D). Similar contract language or local district policy would appear to be a step in the right direction as it sheds light on the issue and sets forth expectations for collegiality.

Finally, the role of school leadership in preventing workplace bullying was the focus of a study by Waggoner (2003) who found that administrators often ignored bullying behavior among adults. Further, Wagoner found that although some school districts had policies on student bullying and sexual harassment, they generally did not have policies defining adult bullying nor did they have policies providing procedures for dealing with workplace abuse. Waggoner urged school districts to address the problem of adult bullying by recognizing that bullying is not a joke but malicious behavior with consequences; that administrators set the tone for the school and how their leadership styles resolve conflict; that schools must adopt a workplace abuse policy that includes examples of unacceptable behavior and specific steps that will be taken if bullying is identified; that conflict resolution and mediation is needed to resolve reported abuse; and that every teacher has the right to be treated with dignity, the right to safe working conditions, and should not face retaliation for reporting abuse.

## Methods

This non-experimental, explanatory, quantitative study (Kleinheksel, 2018) explored the prevalence of adult bullying of professional and non-professional K-12 employees from a sample of public school districts and public school academies in all 83 counties in Michigan. Email invitations were sent from SurveyMonkey to over 2,300 professional and support staff in K-12 districts and public school academies of differing sizes in urban, suburban, and rural areas in Michigan with a response rate of 14% ( $N = 324$ ). Invitations included basic information to recruit participants to respond to a survey about workplace climate but did not reference adult bullying.

An online survey was conducted using the Negative Acts Questionnaire-Revised (NAQ-R), a survey tool originally developed in Norway by Stale Einarsen, group leader of the Bergen Bullying Research Group at the University of Bergen, and Bjorn Raknes. The NAQ-R was designed to measure perceived exposure to bullying at work (Bergen Bullying Research Group, 2010). Einarsen, Hoel, and Notelaers (2009) evaluated the reliability and validity of the NAQ-R and concluded it comprises a "reliable and valid measure of exposure to workplace bullying" (p. 38), while Nielson, Notelaers, and Einarsen (2011) note that the NAQ-R has been validated in several studies.

The NAQ-R consists of 22 questions to which participants in this study responded after the initial explanatory paragraph: "The following behaviors are often seen as examples of negative behavior in the workplace. During the current school year, how often have you been subjected to the following negative acts in your current position?" The NAQ-R provides a 5-point scale response: *never*, *infrequently* (changed from the original wording "*now and then*"), *monthly*, *weekly*, or *daily*. The words "bully" and "bullying" did not appear in the email or the consent form and did not appear in the survey until after participants responded to these 22 questions to eliminate bias in responding. After completing the NAQ-R questions, a definition of bullying at work was given to respondents, and they were then asked a series of questions designed to determine if they considered themselves targets of such bullying or witnessed adult bullying in their workplace. Additional questions collected data about adult bullying incident types, workplace climate, school district policies, and the demographics and characteristics of adult bullying targets and their bullies.

While no one definition of adult bullying exists, for the purpose of this study the working definition of bullying includes aspects of many researchers' descriptions of adult bullying (Hodson, Roscigno, & Lopez, 2006; Namie & Namie, 2009; National Education Association, 2012; Workplace Bullying Institute, 2007): Adult bullying is the repeated and persistent nonphysical mistreatment of a person including verbal abuse, threatening conduct, intimidation, attempts to frustrate or wear down, humiliate, pressure, and provoke that threatens the psychological integrity, career, safety, and health of the target.

## The Findings, Discussion and Conclusions

The 324 survey participants (Table 1) represent a 14% response rate based on 2,313 receiving the emailed invitation.

Table 1. Demographics for Survey Respondents<sup>1</sup>

	# Male	# Female
Position		
Paraprofessional/Non-teaching staff	3	7
Student Support (Counselor, Nurse, Social Worker)	3	34
Teacher	40	226
Highest Education Level Completed		
High School or some college	0	8
Bachelor Degree	17	90
Graduate Degree or Doctorate	28	180
Age		
18-25	2	10
25-45	28	160
45+	15	109

<sup>1</sup>Excludes incomplete survey data

Respondents were asked the type or level of building in which they worked. Elementary and K-8 level compose 43.8% ( $N = 142$ ), and Middle/Jr. High and High School level compose 51.2% ( $N = 166$ ), recognizing that K-8 and Middle/Jr. High levels overlap and respondents could only indicate one choice. The remaining 4.9% ( $N = 16$ ) work in preschool, alternate school, vocational school, or central office settings.

Self-reporting by respondents of school district location indicates that 13.3% ( $N = 43$ ) work in urban districts, 26.9% ( $N = 87$ ) work in suburban districts, and the majority, 59.9% ( $N = 194$ ), work in rural school districts. School district size was broken into four categories with respondents indicating those under 500 students, 16.1% ( $N = 52$ ); under 2,000 students, 43.8% ( $N = 142$ ); 2,001-10,000 students, 38.9% ( $N = 126$ ); and over 10,000 students, 1.2% ( $N = 4$ ). A majority of respondents reported being a member of a union, 77.8% ( $N = 252$ ), and 22.2% ( $N = 72$ ) reported no affiliation with a union.

### Frequencies

Frequencies reported in this study indicate that 27.8% ( $N = 90$ ) of 324 respondents were bullied on an infrequent to daily rate during the first seven months of the 2016-2017 school year, which compares closely with adult bullying levels in the generalized workplace. K-12 schools are not exempt from adults bullying other adults in their workplace. Responses to the 22 questions of the NAQ-R (Table 2) give insight into the types of bullying most commonly experienced in K-12 schools with respondents reporting the highest level of negative acts in their workplace in the following areas: (a) being exposed to an unmanageable workload, 70.7% ( $N = 229$ ); (b) having opinions or views ignored, 66% ( $N = 214$ ); (c) feeling ignored or excluded, 65.1% ( $N = 211$ ); (d) having someone withhold information which affects their performance,

64.8% ( $N = 210$ ); and (e) believing they are given tasks with unreasonable deadlines, 56.5% ( $N = 183$ ).

Respondents reported that they were targets of the following negative acts surveyed in the NAQ-R: (a) spreading of gossip or rumors about the target, 49.4% ( $N = 160$ ); (b) being ordered to do work below level of competence, 46% ( $N = 149$ ); (c) having key responsibilities removed or replaced, 45.7% ( $N = 148$ ); (d) excessive monitoring of work, 41% ( $N = 133$ ); (e) being humiliated or ridiculed, 40.1% ( $N = 130$ ); (f) being ignored or facing hostile reaction when approaching, 39.8% ( $N = 129$ ); (g) pressured to not claim entitlements such as sick days or expenses, 38% ( $N = 123$ ); (h) insulting remarks made about the target, 36.4% ( $N = 118$ ); (i) repeated reminders of errors or mistakes, 36.1% ( $N = 117$ ); (j) being shouted at or the target of spontaneous anger, 33.6% ( $N = 109$ ); (k) persistent criticism of work or effort, 33.3% ( $N = 108$ ); and (l) allegations made against target, 26.9% ( $N = 87$ ).

A smaller number of respondents reported negative acts that included: (a) intimidating behaviors such as finger-pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, or blocking their way, 20.4% ( $N = 66$ ); (b) hints or signals from others that they should quit their jobs, 20.1% ( $N = 65$ ); (c) being subjected to excessive teasing and sarcasm, 17.9% ( $N = 58$ ); (d) having practical jokes played on them by someone they do not get along with, 9.3% ( $N = 30$ ); and (e) threats of violence or abuse, 8.3% ( $N = 27$ ).

Table 2. Responses to the NAQ-R

Question	Percent	Percent
	( <i>N</i> )	( <i>N</i> )
	Never	Infrequently-Daily
Someone withholding information which affects your performance	35.2 (114)	64.8 (210)
Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work	59.9 (194)	40.1 (130)
Being ordered to do work below your level of competence	54.0 (175)	46.0 (149)
Having key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks	54.3 (176)	45.7 (148)
Spreading of gossip and rumors about you	50.6 (164)	49.4 (160)
Being ignored or excluded	34.9 (113)	65.1 (211)
Having insulting or offensive remarks made about your person, attitudes or your private life	63.6 (206)	36.4 (118)
Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger	66.4 (215)	33.6 (109)

Intimidating behaviors such as finger-pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, blocking your way	79.6 (258)	20.4 (66)
Hints or signals from others that you should quit your job	79.9 (259)	20.1 (65)
Repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes	63.9 (207)	36.1 (117)
Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when you approach	60.2 (195)	39.8 (129)
Persistent criticism of your work or work-effort	66.7 (216)	33.3 (108)
Having your opinions or views ignored	34.0 (110)	66.0 (214)
Practical jokes carried out by people you don't get along with	90.7 (294)	9.3 (30)
Being given tasks with unreasonable deadlines	43.5 (141)	56.5 (183)
Having allegations made against you	73.1 (237)	26.9 (87)
Excessive monitoring of your work	59.0 (191)	41.0 (133)
Pressure not to claim something to which by right you are entitled (e.g., sick leave, personal days, holiday, entitlement, travel expenses)	62.0 (201)	38.0 (123)
Being the subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm	82.1 (266)	17.9 (58)
Being exposed to an unmanageable workload	29.3 (95)	70.7 (229)
Threats of violence or physical abuse or actual abuse	91.7 (297)	8.3 (27)

## Findings

While the data collected in this study was unable to show any significant relationship between the target, the bully, demographic variables, and whether or not a person was targeted for bullying, the data shows comparably the prevalence of adult bullying in the K-12 work environment with the data from similar studies in the generalized workplace (Namie, 2014; Workplace Bullying Institute, 2007). In other words, adult bullying in K-12 schools is just as prevalent as it is in other professions and organizations despite the fact that educators work so tirelessly to prevent this behavior in their students. Furthermore, while the study found that 27.8% ( $N = 90$ ) of respondents were bullied in their K-12 work environments, an even larger

percentage of respondents, 41% ( $N = 133$ ), were aware that at least one other adult in their building was the target of adult-on-adult bullying.

Unlike the results of the Workplace Bullying Institute (2007) study, where 72% of the adult bullies were reported to be bosses, K-12 school personnel in this study responded that only 32.7% ( $N = 106$ ) of the bullying was from someone the respondent considered to be a boss (8% was by a supervisor, 18.8% by a building administrator, and 5.9% by a district administrator). The study revealed that 27.8% ( $N = 90$ ) of respondents indicated that the bully was a “same level colleague,” 3.7% ( $N = 12$ ) from a support person, and fully 57.4% ( $N = 186$ ) selected “other” to describe their bully, which included responses like department chair, board member, union official, student, parent, grandparent of a student, etc. It should be noted that respondents could enter more than one response to indicate the relationship between the target and their bully, and thus, totaled more than 100%.

K-12 school respondents seemed to indicate that their reported bullying was ignored less often than in generalized workplace studies, but it should be noted again that respondents could (and often did) indicate multiple responses. Only 11.1% ( $N = 36$ ) of reports were ignored, although respondents also reported that for 25% ( $N = 81$ ), the bullying did not stop, and 3.1% ( $N = 10$ ) indicated bullying increased after reporting. In only 18.2% ( $N = 59$ ) of the incidents did respondents indicate the bullying stopped or the bully was disciplined or fired. In response to another question, 65.1% ( $N = 211$ ) indicated adult bullying in their building/district has not been addressed at all.

A comparison can also be made between educational personnel bullying and student bullying research results. K-12 educational personnel have, as identified in this survey, been the target of adult-on-adult behavior at a frequency of 27.8%. In comparison to this percentage, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2017) reports that from 20.8% to one-third of K-12 students are bullied by fellow students. These educational personnel who are adult targets of bullying often receive training in preventing and resolving student bullying but have not received similar training regarding adult bullying, with only 12.4% ( $N = 40$ ) of survey respondents indicating they had received some type of training to recognize, prevent, or resolve adult bullying. As these results show, in spite of being trained to recognize and resolve student bullying, a significant number of adults in K-12 schools bully others and/or neglect to prevent or resolve adult-on-adult bullying in the school workplace. With the current nationwide emphasis on requiring school districts to develop and adopt policies to report, prevent and resolve student-on-student bullying, it is notable that no such requirement or law regarding adult behavior in the K-12 workplace exists, and only 18.2% ( $N = 59$ ) of respondents reported their schools have policies regarding adult bullying.

### **Implications for School Leaders**

Superintendents, school boards, and school administrators must be proactive and engage in preventing and resolving adult bullying behavior in the K-12 workplace. If 27.8% of the students in their schools were being bullied, immediate action would be demanded, and action would be taken to help alleviate the problem. With 27.8% of the respondents to this study indicating another adult in their school is actively bullying them, and 41% reporting adult

bullying occurs in their school from the same or a different bully, there is a definite negative workplace problem in schools and/or districts that educational leaders need to address.

Employers are often reluctant to recognize, correct, or prevent workplace bullying when it falls short of illegal harassment (Namie, 2003). Targets often feel victimized a second time by the lack of organizational policies and legal statutes addressing such abuse (Meglich-Sespico, Faley, & Knapp, 2007). The results of this study demonstrate the need for improvement in the climate of the K-12 workplace. It is past time to develop workplace bullying policies and procedures. Policymakers need to look to existing policies (e.g., Winchester MEA, 2013; Healthy Workplace Bill, 2011), adopt and approve a district policy and local procedures, and enforce these policies to help prevent and resolve adult bullying. Fostering a healthy, safe workplace environment is the responsibility of employers and their representatives.

Educational leaders must not ignore adult bullying problems. As this study reveals, reporting adult bullying incidents did not resolve the problem or stop the bullying in almost 40% of incidents, and over 65% of respondents indicated their K-12 schools have never addressed adult bullying. The cry for help and protection by the target of adult bullying has been heard through these survey results. Action needs to be taken and be effective to reduce the toll adult bullying takes on the targeted person and on others in the school district. School leaders must address the stress and emotional toll on the target and the remaining staff, as well as how adult bullying affects workplace performance if bullying is allowed to continue. As one anonymous survey respondent commented, "I am considering leaving the profession because treatment like this is not right and not helpful in our main purpose of providing an education to our students." There is a cost to the students and the school when teachers leave or cannot be recruited to teach or sub in their classrooms due to persistent, unaddressed adult bullying.

Administrators, school boards, educational leaders, and all K-12 education professionals and staff must be proactive and vigilant to prevent, stop, and eliminate all bullying (whether the target is an adult or a student) by recognizing that bullying exists in the workplace, creating and enforcing anti-bullying policies, providing training for prevention of and resolving bullying, creating safe and non-retaliatory methods for targets to report bullying, mediating bullying incidents, providing avenues to a positive resolution, disciplining bullies, providing options for targets to recover from bullying, and, most importantly, providing all stakeholders a safe, non-threatening place to work and learn.

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