

Good Evening Chairman Sawyers and Members of the Board,

My name is Jayne Cobern and my address is on file with the clerk. I am here tonight to share with you my story of being a victim of workplace bullying here in Prince William County School. 14 years ago I took a position as a reading teacher at a local elementary school. With 4 years of teaching experience and a brand new Masters Degree, I was excited to become a reading teacher, but soon became the victim of pervasive bullying by my principal. I was criticized for not doing things fast enough, well enough or the same way the former reading teacher had done it. She belittled my skills, questioned my judgement and criticized everything I did. When I asked for a mentor to help me she said that she would be my mentor and required me to meet with her weekly. I left these meetings feeling beaten down. Despite giving me “meets standards” on my formal evaluation in all areas, she told me that I didn’t know how to plan a lesson. From that day on I was required to submit a formal written lesson plan for all eight of my groups, each day. It took me hours to complete these lesson plans each night. When I called HR to ask if I could be required to do this when no one else had to, I was told that the principal could require whatever she wanted. I felt so defeated when I hung up. The bullying continued.

At our weekly meetings she would tell me that classroom teachers had complained to her about me...that I was too loud, that I had interrupted their teaching, that I was late, that I was early and many other things. I began to feel like there were spys all around me and withdrew from the other teachers. I ate lunch on my own and was afraid to do or say anything. I cried each day before I came to work, and each night when I came home. I even considered leaving teaching. The bullying continued for months. Then one day I suggested having an after school coffee and cookies meeting for teachers where we could talk about literacy and discuss our instruction. I still remember what she said. In a sarcastic voice she asked me, “Who’s going to lead it because you’re never here!” I had been coming to work early and leaving hours late each day for months. It was then that I knew I had to get out of this situation.

I requested an immediate transfer and I called HR. The principal agreed to this plan and I felt so relieved. I sent my resume to school after school and received emails back from many principals saying that they were interested but just had to speak with my principal. Then I never heard back from them. She was sabotaging me. Fortunately for me, a colleague who had seen this principal bully other teachers before connected me to an administrator at my current school where I have taught for the past 14 years.

It took several years for me to once again be confident in my teaching abilities and almost a decade before I could think about that administrator without a ball of anxiety in my stomach. If only I had known who to talk to and what to do, things would have been so different. Instead I felt completely alone.

In the years since then I have heard from many different teachers, TAs and other staff that this principal chooses 1 or 2 people a year to bully. It is like an open secret in the county. She did it before me, and I presume has been doing it since. She is still a principal here in Prince William County. It's about time this type of harassment of teachers is stopped. I ask the board to please study the issue of workplace bullying, to put in place clear guidelines for reporting workplace bullying and to implement clear consequences for those who bully others.

Thank you.