



School Employees & Low Morale

The South Carolina Education Association believes that school employees are entitled to a safe and healthy school in which to work. When school employees have an environment that is conducive to teaching, our children have a better opportunity to learn.

Introduction

According to the National Center for Education Statistics*, at the end of the 2009-2010 school year, South Carolina had 48,209 teachers working in 1230 schools teaching 770,122 students. If a teacher's work environment is indeed a child's learning environment, then workplace morale affected 818,331 teachers and students. In spite of this, school board policies do not address the issue of morale and employee turnover, and many districts make it difficult for employees to transfer from bad situations. Formal evaluation and student discipline are two major sources of low morale.

In addition to evaluation and student discipline, administrators and teachers are under never ending scrutiny related to student achievement. Schools struggle with parental involvement, inadequate and inequitable funding, reduced staffing, No Child Left Behind, testing without purpose, and how to compete with technology, just to name a few. Teachers do the best they can in very difficult circumstances, yet sometimes they find themselves in jeopardy because of circumstances beyond their control or their lack of skill in handling conflict.

This paper is intended to provide general information about low morale. In presenting this information, The SCEA recognizes the many school districts and administrators who provide a healthy work environment.

*<http://nces.ed.gov>

Low Morale

Teachers who call The SCEA for support often use the term "harassment" to describe their situation. Harassment* is defined as "unwelcome conduct that is based on race, color, sex, religion, national origin, disability, and/or age. Harassment becomes unlawful where 1) enduring the offensive conduct becomes a condition of continued employment, or 2) the conduct is severe or pervasive enough to create a work environment that a reasonable person would consider intimidating, hostile, or abusive".

Most of the situations reported to The SCEA do not meet the legal definition above. EEOC provides more clarity: "Petty slights, annoyances, and isolated incidents (unless extremely serious) will not rise to the level of illegality. To be unlawful, the conduct must create a work environment that would be intimidating, hostile, or offensive to reasonable people".

Low morale or harassment (real or perceived) can affect an employee's physical and emotional health. Unfortunately, South Carolina laws are silent on this issue. Factors that contribute to low morale or feelings of being harassed:

- ◆ lack of supplies and resources
- ◆ frequent "write ups"
- ◆ preferential treatment for certain people
- ◆ the culture of parents and students
- ◆ the teacher's assignment
- ◆ the composition of the class
- ◆ lack of administrative support
- ◆ informal and/or formal evaluation
- ◆ lack of professional decorum by administration or colleagues
- ◆ overuse/misuse of email
- ◆ spoken to in unkind, harsh tone
- ◆ criticizing the teacher in front of others
- ◆ unfair observations
- ◆ inability to speak freely or share individual ideas and concerns
- ◆ always believing the student
- ◆ employee turnover
- ◆ stacking a meeting with multiple administrators but refusing to allow the employee to have a representative present

*<http://archive.eeoc.gov/types/harassment.html>

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How Teachers are Affected

Teaching is viewed by many to be one of the toughest but most rewarding jobs. Teachers choose teaching as a profession, knowing that it isn't the highest paid job around, knowing that today's children come into the classroom with many needs, knowing that resources are limited, and knowing that funding for education is shaky. So, why would anyone want to teach? Most teachers say they felt "called to teach".

Teachers move inside a complex and political network of students, parents, administrators, colleagues and the community. Public scrutiny is never ending. They face obstacles and challenges that can zap their energy and enthusiasm. How they handle these stressors can impact their career.

From all appearances, colleges do not discuss employment conflict in their teacher education programs. This means that some teachers enter the profession lacking the skills they need to navigate through employment conflicts. Addressing workplace conflict requires a different mindset, demeanor, knowledge base and skill set than teaching children.

When a teacher is called to the principal's office for scolding or to address conflict, she only has a few feet from her classroom to the front office to mentally adjust to what's about to come.

Caught off guard or unable to determine the best way to handle the meeting, a teacher may say the wrong thing.

Examples of actions that create problems:

- ◆ Weak coping skills, losing control
- ◆ Refusing to meet
- ◆ Sending an angry or unprofessional e-mail
- ◆ Venting on Facebook
- ◆ Making comments to students or parents
- ◆ Fragile emotional health

Morale problems make it difficult for teachers to perform at their peak and can contribute to burnout. Increased demands on teacher time means fewer opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, vent frustrations, and explore solutions. This climate can lead to depression and greater use of sick leave.



Seeking help can be difficult when a teacher feels victimized. Individual coping skills, emotional health, the support of family and friends and other factors influence how a teacher reacts to mistreatment. Too often, teachers do not have the wherewithal to address their concerns.

Teachers and school employees are important to our future. School districts should make improving morale a priority.

How Students Are Affected

The school climate affects student achievement. Students need a physical environment that provides basic needs like a comfortable temperature, warm meals, working equipment and so forth as well as an emotional environment where they feel respected and safe. As they progress through the grades, they become a product of their environment, observing and learning from what goes on around them. They learn what they live and then live what they learned. What do students learn in a school where school employee morale is low? Is there a contradiction between the character traits school employees are to model for students and the manner in which administrators and teachers relate to one another?

If students view administrators and teachers as role models, how will they apply what they observe and learn at school to the relationships they develop with their families, partners, future employers or employees? How will they respond to their own mistreatment, if they find themselves in an unhealthy relationship? School districts must not forget that students are watching.

Teachers who are depressed, out sick frequently, distracted by conflict, walking on eggshells, worried about their evaluation, stressed about test scores and so forth cannot deliver their best teaching.

Improved teacher morale facilitates improved student performance and students have a better chance of success when the school climate is healthy.

How to Address Low Morale

Morale is an emotional issue – a reaction to the environment. Most of the time, employees know what or who is dragging people down. If not, seek to determine the cause. Make a distinction between the things you can control and those you can't. Although many things seem out of any individual's control, here are some things each school employee can do.

- ◆ Collaborate with colleagues and present solutions to administration. Call The SCEA if you need help with your presentation.
- ◆ Seek ways to feel appreciated and appreciate others. Make those around you feel valuable. Recognize and acknowledge their good work. This small effort can change the climate of a school.
- ◆ Connect and collaborate with colleagues and other professionals.
- ◆ Challenge yourself. Seek new and different ways to energize your work and keep it interesting.
- ◆ Dress better. How you look affects how you feel.

How to Address Conflict

Addressing conflict takes deliberate action. Here are steps to address mistreatment.

1. Document situations of concern.
2. Meet with your supervisor - face to face - and ask that the mistreatment stop. Follow up in writing.
3. If nothing changes, consider a formal grievance. A grievance is a claim by an employee that a violation, misinterpretation or misapplication of a provision of school board policies has occurred. Filing a grievance is "professional" and teachers should not hesitate to take this action. Grievances normally must be filed within 10 days of the incident. Teachers should check their school board policies for the guidelines that apply to their district.
4. File a complaint with the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) www.eeoc.gov, if the situation meets the EEOC's legal definition of harassment.
5. Call The SCEA.

Possible Outcomes from Filing a Grievance

Teachers frequently ask about the consequences of filing a grievance. Fear and uncertainty often cause teachers to hesitate to file a grievance. School boards provide the grievance procedure as a professional way to address serious conflicts. The procedure includes a promise that no retaliation will occur. A teacher has greater protection when she uses the grievance procedure to address her concerns. Filing a grievance can result in the following:

- ◆ Misunderstandings and disputes are aired
- ◆ Policies, rules, practices, or procedures are clarified.
- ◆ The district office becomes aware of the conflict.
- ◆ Filing a grievance sends a message that the teacher will no longer sit idly by while harassment takes place, and a written record is created.
- ◆ The teacher makes a specific settlement request.
- ◆ The teacher has the ability to take the grievance through several levels through the superintendent and sometimes the school board.

The EEOC

The EEOC requires that harassment be based on race, color, sex, religion, national origin, disability, or age. This means that if an administrator is mean and rude, their behavior may not violate the EEOC law. To further illustrate this, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 does not include the word "harassment."

There have been Court rulings that inappropriate conduct that is not sex-based may subject an employer to liability for sex discrimination if the employee's conduct affects only one gender OR affects men and women differently.

An employee may work under a supervisor who routinely acts abusively by screaming, using foul language, invading personal space and making threatening physical gestures,

but the supervisor's conduct was not sex-based because the supervisor never made lewd comments, referred to women employees in gender-specific terms, or imposed gender-specific requirements upon women employees. The Supreme Court has held that hostile acts do not need to be overtly sex-or gender-specific. Even if the harasser is mistreating everyone, a hostile work environment may exist if one's gender is more disadvantageously affected.

Teachers who file a complaint with the EEOC may wait several months for the agency to investigate their complaint. The teacher should notify the district of their concern or file a grievance. This official notice to the employer with an opportunity to respond will be very important to the EEOC. Visit <http://www.eeoc.gov> or <http://www.state.sc.us/schac> for more information.

What Can School Districts Do?

- ◆ Establish an expectation that all employees must be treated with respect. Hold employees accountable if they do not live up to this expectation.
- ◆ Develop a code of conduct to address behavior frequently interpreted as harassing, threatening or intimidating.
- ◆ Provide training that includes discussion of conduct that is unacceptable.
- ◆ Support the use of voluntary mediation.
- ◆ Promote the confidential use of Employee Assistance benefits for stress and anger management.
- ◆ Treat complaints about harassment seriously and conduct a proper investigation.
- ◆ Do not dismiss allegations of harassment merely because there is no evidence of an "EEO" issue.
- ◆ Train administrators how to motivate, discipline, and coach employees in a respectful manner.
- ◆ Protect employees who complain about harassment from retaliation.
- ◆ Honor transfer requests and allow employees to move. Nothing good comes from forcing an employee to stay in an environment that jeopardizes her health and well being. It's not in the best interest of the employee or students.

Conclusion

Today's schools are filled with a diverse student population comprised of special needs children, children from poverty, children who are homeless, children who are antisocial, children who are noncompliant, children who are not interested in learning and children so desperate for attention, they will do anything to get it. Teachers take on the role of mother, father, counselor, nurse, and friend. They struggle with long hours, not enough planning time, too many meetings, too much paperwork, crowded classrooms, and inadequate supplies and materials. Some teachers work in a fractured environment that interferes with their ability to deliver effective instruction.

In spite of these challenges, teachers draw strength from their love for teaching and the wonderful young minds that are a daily source of inspiration. Given what teachers and school employees accomplish in the current climate, what more could they accomplish if their work environment was better? A teacher's work environment is a child's learning environment.

We should create safe and healthy places for school employees to work and students to learn - an environment that is respectful and supportive. When teachers and school employees get what they need, our students have their best opportunity to be successful.

Resources

Department of Education

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/sexhar00.html>

Sexual Harassment: It's Not Academic

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/ocrshpam.pdf>

Workplace Harassment is a Form of Discrimination

<http://www.fcc.gov/encyclopedia/understanding-workplace-harassment-fcc-staff>

Prohibited Practices

<http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/practices/index.cfm>

Harassment

<http://www.eeoc.gov/laws/practices/harassment.cfm>

Women's Safety and Health Issues at Work

<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/women/work-structure.html>

The SCEA Member Advocacy Center

<http://www.thescea.org/mac>

Article: "Stress"

<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/stress-management/MY00435>

Article: 10 Signs You're Bullied at Work

Workplace Bullying Institute

<http://www.workplacebullying.org/>

Article: When Workplace Bullying Goes Too Far

Stress at Work

<http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/stress/>