

Mark Knowles  
RSU 23 Education Association

Legislative Document No. 880 S.P. 294 In Senate, March 8, 2021

Endorsement and Support of Legislative Action to Protect School Employees from  
Workplace Bullying

April 7, 2021

From: Mark Knowles, RSU23 Education Association, President of Teachers

To: Education and Cultural Affairs Committee

I am writing this letter in support of LD 880, An Act to Protect School Employees from Workplace Bullying.

Recently, one of our schools held an annual public forum to welcome incoming students and parents to the school for the upcoming fall school year. During this annual custom each department presents curriculum and learning opportunities to the families transitioning to a new building and important phase of their education. This annual event not only welcomes students and parents to a new learning community, but also provides an opportunity to showcase the hard work of dedicated educators and the programs offered by the district and school.

Unfortunately, during the presentation, and while one of the presenters was speaking, another colleague sent an inappropriate text message to the coordinator of the event. The text message was erroneously displayed on the screen while the presenter spoke. The messages were insulting and critical of the speaker. Although the messages were intended to be private, they were displayed to the entire staff and to the parents and incoming students while the department head was speaking. Comments saying, she should not be allowed to speak and why is she saying anything, and other sarcastic comments that were unprofessional, hurtful, and disrespectful. Not only did one educator participate, but others who were in the group text participated in this bullying banter.

Needless to say, the teacher, who is close to retirement, has been humiliated beyond belief. In an effort to console and support the victim, the Association discovered that this teacher has been the target of repeated insults and comments criticizing her demeanor and personality. There are components and hints of age and gender discrimination, but they are not specific enough to apply. There were individual unprofessional behaviors that were unacceptable, but there is no process or protocol or practice to address this other than the individual disciplinary methods typically utilized. A letter to the file, or a disciplinary warning discussion to individual offenders does not improve the learning community, nor do those actions address community bullying or re-establish a standard of workplace safety for students and staff.

There are three areas that were impacted by the actions of these educators. The individual teacher's good name and reputation in the learning community was damaged, the school and learning community was impacted, and the administration was placed in a difficult position to resolve the matter. Although disciplinary action was part of the reparations and an email sent to the staff, as of this time there has been no action to make reparations to the school community.

There is nothing that can completely repair these types of actions. However, if the school system were to adopt more tolerant and collegial methods for interactions, then there would at least be a school wide reform focused on eliminating harassment and bullying from the school. At this point in time the message sent to the staff was interpreted that this type of humiliating behavior will receive a slap on the wrist, but that the problem is not large enough to address as an organization.

Since this incident, many teachers have come forward expressing their experiences of other incidents involving staff bullying, and I am certain that if this law is amended to

include school staff, it will force administrators and school leaders to enact practices and training needed to improve school culture so teachers are free to teach, and students can effectively learn in a safe and tolerant environment. For students to engage in bully-free learning, every teacher must be dedicated to contributing to a bully-free work environment.

Our school event should never have happened. I do not believe people purposefully meant to harm anyone, but they did cause harm. This could be a learning opportunity to improve attitudes and actions in and during the many interactions we have with each other in schools and with school employees and students. If this amendment was in place, there would be a variety of reparations employed to address the matter. Therefore, I strongly urge you to consider supporting this action to include language incorporating educators in this important law.

Sincerely,

Mark Knowles, RSU23EA, President of Teachers