BULLYING HAS BECOME A NATIONAL ISSUE. BUT WHAT DO YOU DO IF THE SCHOOL BULLY IS YOUR CHILD’S TEACHER?

By Jessica Kelmon

When Karen Eubank’s son first complained about his “mean” teacher, she took it with a grain of salt. “Usually ‘mean’ just means a teacher makes you study, is demanding, or wants you to answer questions,” says the Dallas, TX mom. “Not that [the teacher’s] being verbally abusive.”

Unfortunately, that’s exactly what it meant. Eubank had transferred her son from a private school to a new charter that a friend recommended. During the tour, Eubank fell in love with the school — there was a garden, they played music at lunch, the school was “just beautiful,” she says.

But after the school year began, her fourth grader began saying that he didn’t want to go to school. Every day before school, he claimed he felt nauseated. Every afternoon at pickup, he was angry. Eubank assumed the boy was just adjusting to his new school. It wasn’t until Halloween that Eubanks discovered the chilling truth. She asked a child in the class next door to her son’s how he liked school. He replied that he was fine, but that her son “wasn’t having such a good time.” The teacher, the boy told her, “yells at him all the time and we can hear it in the next room.”

Eubank set up meetings — first with the teacher — who insisted the problem was her son’s inattentiveness — and then the principal — who refused to do anything. “They both pulled me in to say they were worried about my kid,” she says, “that he couldn’t pay attention, couldn’t focus. They were both basically hinting that my son needed medication.”

Taking respected education professionals at their word, Eubank took her son for a psychological evaluation at Baylor University and learned there was nothing wrong with him.

An active school volunteer, Eubank chatted up other parents who all noted that her son’s teacher never smiled. Meanwhile, her son shared more detail about his teacher. “She picks on me and is mean,’ he told me,” says Eubank. “‘I pay attention,’ he insisted, ‘but I look out the window because I’d rather look at trees and listen than look at her angry face.’” But when her son looked out the window, the teacher would regularly humiliate him in front of the other students, yelling at him and slamming her hand on his desk.

Within a few days, following another hand-slamming-the-
An excerpt from a document discussing the impact of bullying in schools, particularly focusing on the role of teachers as bullies. The text highlights the need for better identification, addressing, and rectification of teacher bullying, contrasting it with the more common student-to-student bullying. It includes a case study of a teacher who admitted to past bullying and the impact this had on students, emphasizing the importance of listening to and learning from others' experiences. The document also explores the challenges children face when they must respond to bully teachers and advocates for the practical solutions to address this issue.
African-American students, and cringed when the principal mocked parents with accents. Other teachers were terrified to be seen talking to Sigal, else they face the principal’s wrath. “They’d hide behind a cabinet door,” she says. After battling it out with the principal for two-and-a-half years, she threw in the towel and transferred to a Hebrew school.

Sigal thinks that there might be another way — and now as an educational consultant (she launched a startup called Stizzil to help kids with tutoring, test prep, self-esteem, and more), she’s been on the frontlines with bully teachers. One of her female students wrote about being bullied by her second grade teacher who made her “a pariah;” the negative effects lasted through middle school. Sigal accompanied a male student’s immigrant parent on a visit to a school counselor. “The [counselor] puts her head down on her desk and says to me [in front of the child’s parent], ‘I have no idea why you’re wasting your time, he’s another dumb [racial slur].’” Sigal says.

**TAking ACTION**

In the face of such blatant bullying, Sigal offers this advice: “First thing you have to do is document, document, document.” Write down the date, the time, and exactly what happened. Despite the obvious pain you’re feeling as a parent, Sigal says, it’s crucial to be as reasonable and objective as possible.

If the situation isn’t too egregious, meet with the teacher to see if you can find a resolution. If that doesn’t work, Sigal recommends learning what you can from everyone at school — your child, other kids, parents in the class. Volunteer at school, drive the carpool, keep your ear to the ground, all the while documenting everything you learn. During this fact-finding period, Sigal says to start building a support network of parents — after all, one parent’s complaints can easily be waved off, while a group of concerned parents has more chance of being heard.

Sigal advises parents to resist storming the principal’s office right away. “Follow the chain of command,” she says, starting with, say, a senior teacher or the head of that teacher’s department, then the vice principal, principal, principal’s supervisor, and superintendent. This approach works in your favor for two reasons: One, the closer someone is to the problem, the more likely they’ll be able to take swift, effective action; and two, when you go to the top, one of the first questions will be, ‘Who have you talked to about this, and what did they say?’ If you can’t answer effectively, you’re likely to be directed back to those you’ve skipped. And always, says Sigal, document every bullying incident. “If you have documentation for a couple of months, they can’t ignore that,” Sigal says. “And if they try to, I’d say ‘I’m going to the newspaper.’”

**A BATTLE KIDS CAN’T FIGHT**

When it comes to protecting kids from bully teachers, sadly kids are in a vulnerable position — and ill-equipped to fight the battle on their own.

Case in point: A high school junior in Boston, MA who...
now needs an attorney's help to clear his school record. The teen repeatedly — and in vain — asked to be moved out of a class where he felt like the target of an abusive teacher, says his lawyer Daniel Maloney. The acrimonious situation came to a head one day when the boy vented his frustrations — and it sounded like a threat. He was summarily suspended, putting a mar on his permanent record that may jeopardize his college prospects. Moral of the story? The teen was unable to defend himself against the bully teacher and now needs legal help to protect his future.

When it comes to bully teachers, there’s no real silver lining — but there are different routes parents can take. In Eubank’s case, homeschooling was the best choice. Now her son is happily back in a public high school and doing well with “brilliant teachers,” she says. For Sigal, a school transfer did the trick. But she believes following certain protocol — like documenting every incident, building a support system, and working up the chain of command — can protect kids from continued trauma at the hands of a bully teacher and save them from the ordeal of leaving a school altogether. But, says Sigal, the fight to protect your child from a bully teacher may not (and usually won’t) be easy.