

Bullying¹

In 2007, Sally Asnip retired after more than thirty years of teaching for the Cobb County School District—the second-largest school district in Georgia. Asnip worked at McCleskey Middle School, where she taught math and served as one of the faculty sponsors for the Environmental Club.

Immediately prior to her retirement, Atlanta's WSBTV reported that throughout her tenure at McCleskey, Asnip was the subject of numerous complaints from students, parents, and other teachers, who allege that she had a pattern of harassing, demeaning, intimidating, and even physically bullying students—a pattern that stretched as far back as 1977.

In a 2007 interview with WSBTV, Kathleen Angelucci complained that Asnip frequently bullied her daughter: "She constantly harassed her, followed her, she was trying to intimidate her. [...] It's one thing to guide a child, we all do it, but it's another thing to physically hurt a child to get them to do something you want."

Angelucci was among a number of parents of McCleskey students who identify a pattern of complaints against Asnip. After looking into Asnip's personnel file, Cyndie Westrich—another parent—discovered what she alleges to be a pattern of bullying that, despite frequent complaints, was largely ignored. Westrich told WSBTV, "I found, unfortunately, thirty years [of] outcries from parents, 'Please do something about this teacher.' I saw letters in her file, teachers approaching her, but nothing ever being done."

Allegations against Asnip include, among other things, that she made fun of a hearing-impaired student, threatened to slap a student, pushed students against the wall, and grabbed a student by the neck.

At least three complaints alleging physical bullying were reported by parents to Georgia's Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS). DFCS referred each of these cases back to the Cobb County School District to investigate. None of these investigations found any wrongdoing on Asnip's part.

According to WSBTV, however, Asnip's personnel file indicates that she received verbal warnings from school administrators after some of the complaints were made. Her file also includes a 1990 letter from Dell Loyd—Asnip's Assistant Principal—which states, "We told you that we were tired of covering for you and making excuses for you..." Despite the numerous complaints throughout her tenure at McCleskey, it appears that Asnip was given a one-day suspension.

"Come on, thirty years working in the school system, with thirty years of complaints like this with only one day's suspension?," said Cyndie Westrich to WSBTV. "Come on. Our kids get worse than that."

¹ This case is based on: 2007. Teacher Accused of Bullying Students. *WSBTV.com*. URL = <<http://www.wsbtv.com/news/13407509/detail.html>>. Accessed April 6, 2011. Video is available at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e0Do1ZUXrJc>>.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What is bullying? What are the main similarities and/or differences between peer bullying and bullying from someone in a position of authority (e.g. when a student is bullied by a teacher)? What are the main similarities and/or differences between cases of child-on-child bullying and adult-on-adult bullying?
2. Why should we take bullying seriously? Why shouldn't we dismiss it as (for example) "kids being kids"?
3. What can we do to prevent bullying in schools and workplaces? What are the causes of bullying? What factors perpetuate bullying? How should students, parents, teachers, and/or co-workers respond when someone is being bullied?
4. How should a school administration proceed when one of its employees is accused of bullying students? Does it depend on whether the allegations include physical bullying? Why or why not? How should school administrations balance the rights of the students and the rights of the employees who are accused of bullying?