

[Climate of fear among staff at Cupertino Union School District - Letter from former Kennedy Middle School teacher](#)

[Anu Radha Shankar](#) from Grant Park

I am posting a letter sent to me by a former CUSD teacher. Her account helps us understand what could have been happening behind the scenes at West Valley Elementary.

CUSD Superintendent Wendy Gudalewicz cited staff tensions as the reason behind the reconstitution of West Valley. According to this article: <http://neatoday.org/2012/05/16/bullying-...>, and as evidenced by the teacher's story below, such tensions are not uncommon. Moreover, there is not a single known precedent for school reconstitution aimed at eradicating workplace tensions. Reconstitution is a drastic and expensive move, used as a last resort for turning around low-performing schools. West Valley was rated 10/10 with an API of 955 on [www.greatschools.org](http://www.greatschools.org). So, why was West Valley Elementary reconstituted on the pretext of resolving tensions? Was it purely a power move by the district leadership?

Here is the teacher's letter:

-----  
Letter from Ramey Wells, former teacher at Kennedy/CUSD, 9/20/2015:

At Kennedy we had a principal who for her entire time there harassed and targeted teachers with the full support of the district. It was even before Wendy - then when Wendy came everything escalated. Nicole (the principal) was more aggressive in her approach with teachers. Then we noticed her friends were given special privilege, access, and opportunities. (Several teachers knew Nicole on a private level which no one really cared about until it started to impact the work place). Many teachers reported hearing private information shared with her "friendly" teachers. She allowed and even paid them to rewrite our meeting schedules, determine meeting topics, as well as find curriculum. One teacher even reported being forced to stay in the room while our principal used speaker phone to talk about another teacher to the district. She kept asking to leave because she felt uncomfortable listening in on someone's private information and was told to stay. There were numerous reports of these teachers getting special access to confidential staff information and even sharing it with parents. These teachers knew of policy shifts and other information regarding curriculum shifts and grading shifts long before the rest of us. Remember there is no hierarchy in teaching, no senior teacher staff, or junior executive. So when these few teachers seemed to know much more about what changes, whether it be to curriculum or staff were happening, we wondered why they knew before any of us. Or why were they declaring items of business on behalf of our principal.

After years of certain "undesirable" teachers and new teachers being the target of constant observations and all out assaults on their character, it escalated to a number of firings, transfers, and teachers being placed on improvement plans. We also went through several VPs. (They were her primary means of targeting people. They would pretty much do her bidding because they all want to

become a principal too! Only one stood up to her-and he was moved back to teaching.)

When teachers got vocal about the lack of curriculum and lack of planning time, they were placed on improvement plans. Some veteran teachers were placed on improvement plans for not being "nice" and even students were called in to report on these teachers. Vocal new teachers (those that asked questions in meetings) were put on improvement plans or not granted tenure for being "too vocal" and on one occasion an office worker was confronted by an AP for asking too many tough questions. Why would I be told by veteran teachers, who work closely with the District office to be careful about what you say and do and who you are seen with?

Every example lesson, every example assessment was from the same four people at our school. People whose methods were not researched or even assessed. We were just given their lessons and told-be like them. Teachers who do this are not quality. Quality teachers and learners question everything, they try it out, they are allowed to fail in order to get it right. It's what we have to do to stay innovative. We were not allowed to do this. We had teachers who grew up learning and teaching a certain way, and to come in overnight and say-sorry you've been doing it wrong-do it this way now, even though you don't understand it, or you will be in trouble. Teachers were called in for not doing Common Core lessons, even though our textbooks did not have Common Core standards in them. No one was completely Common Core, so why were only a handful targeted for this? No one was constantly assessing for learning, so why were only a few teachers targeted for this?

All a teacher needed to do to survive was workshop model, post the HSD type signs in your room, and give kids As. Then you had no trouble. Most of us could not do this because we knew this was not our job. We didn't want our job to be like this, and we saw how it was impacting students. When teachers don't understand what they are doing or why, then how can the learners? When teachers are afraid to try something new, how does that impact learners? Myself, along with dozens of colleagues trained countless new teachers who were more than qualified and actually ahead of the game with respect to technology in the classroom. They'd work their butts off for two years, we'd train them, support them, share resources, and give up our time only to have them excused for reasons so petty and trumped up, we had no choice but to be suspicious. It was all very confusing. Why is this teacher in trouble for doing what the rest of his department is doing? So many of us learned to play the game-like any job, except this is not like any other job. We were the only ones concerned with our students and their needs. We simply wanted to be able to do our work. Towards the end it felt like any attempt to move forward, discuss truths, and actually do our job was thwarted. We sat in meetings and meditated instead of planning lessons and assessments! We simply wanted to work, and we wanted our work place to be fair and equitable! That's why we eventually went to the union.

In a similar manner to West Valley, we were also told in small groups by Nicole that we were bullies, glared at people, excluded people etc. (Actually this meeting was billed as a "vision meeting" we were to meet together on our preps with our principal. So myself and my common prep teachers prepared to move forward and really share the vision we had for our school. But we never got that far. Almost immediately we were told that teachers were bullying each other etc. almost the same thing the WV

teachers were told. In reality, it was a complete projection, it was exactly what she and her friends were doing to us! Meeting in secret, glaring, excluding, and even being out right rude to each other. 6th grade teachers actually stopped attending meetings with the other grade levels because they were often hostile and always unproductive. Teachers just hid in their classrooms. It got so bad, that we weren't even allowed to plan together as a 6th grade team. I think I met with my 8 cohorts about 2 times that year. And we were supposed to be rewriting and revamping curriculum, as well as implementing new assessments, and writing new lesson plans.)

The final straw came when a beloved long time veteran teacher was placed on an improvement plan after voicing his concerns about the use of workshop model in teaching math. (He really was asking what we all were-Why were we being force-fed workshop model as the only teaching model that works? Where was the curriculum? Why all the training but no planning time? He was put in a work group with all of Nicole's friends and supporters, so anytime he voiced concern, he was brought to the office.) We banded together to finally put a stop to it and with the full support of CEA decided to go to Wendy. Dozens of us called her and had private conversations about everything we knew. Our principal was a bully, she used other teachers to spy, report on, harass, confront, and exclude others. (The tactics even spread into the classroom. For example two teachers in a special class were not liked anymore, and so the students' requests for meetings with admin on special projects were ignored or pushed out.)

Then when we reported everything about our school, Wendy lied to all of us at a private union meeting assuring us we would have a chance to work out our differences via a mediation, which she never intended to have. She told us that this was like a marriage, and trust issues didn't just go away, you had to work them out. (My take away-You are in an abusive arranged marriage, but you need to work it out, stick with it. There must be something you are doing and saying to cause this abuse.)

She had Royce do our "mediation" on a staff learning day. The woman said she was not mediating and knew nothing of any staff issues. But she was lying because several office workers, reported numerous meetings about staff issues with Nicole and this woman. We then spent the day going through the Simple Rules and applying them to our school. It was not a mediation, it was a hard sell of HSD. Then all of a sudden Nicole and her friend (who stirred up most of the teacher trouble) got transferred up to the district with promotions. We were very happy they were gone, but the process was shady. Why did she get promoted and then how did she then get placed as a mentor principal to West Valley? Then the same things happened there? Her buddy that was suddenly promoted had attempted to move to the district for years unsuccessfully-why now all of a sudden?

This "reconstitution" seems very deliberate now given the history at Kennedy and Cupertino Middle (you will have to ask teachers there about that). Some will say there were bad apples that spoiled it for the rest. However, there is a process that is very clear for eliminating a teacher if they are not performing to the standards. So if teachers were bullying etc. I would think it's the district's responsibility to correct that behavior or fire them. Why did they simply pass them on to a new school? Wouldn't it stand to reason that these bad apples will spoil the environment wherever they go? Why did they just pass them along if they were really that bad? The fact that they couldn't fire them, to me, that

means that teachers were the not the bullies here. After all you can only be a bully if you have power. Who had all the power in these scenarios?

CEA had every valid reason not to trust the district in the re-hiring of WV teachers; you cannot say we will keep 4, and then not give guidelines on how you are selecting those when you are working with a union. CEA assumed this meant they were not going to hire fairly and said we cannot support this. (And given the history at Cupertino and Kennedy can you blame them for questioning this? The former union president is a teacher at Kennedy. He knows what teachers went through and he supported Dave in this decision. As teachers, union leaders also want to keep their day jobs, so they probably don't want to become bigger targets themselves.) Anyone who doesn't understand this, does not understand unions and how they are supposed to work to protect members. Yes, that's what we pay dues for; they protect teachers.

This move was a deliberate and calculated to send a message to teachers. Don't ask questions, do what you are told, you are replaceable. And it's working. Many are afraid, many left, and many more are leaving and actively searching to leave the district. Did Wendy have the right to do this? Yes, but why did she do it? Why did she ruin the lives of these West Valley teachers? Our careers are our lives, we work most of the time for free, many teachers cannot even afford to live near where they work or be in the community, which is probably why you haven't heard much from them. Don't further isolate them by supporting this behavior.

There is so much more to the Kennedy story, but I really feel that it is a better place without Nicole and a few others that were in her circle. However, the general consensus is still that the district is attacking them when we are all supposed to be on the same side.

All of our issues at the end could easily be seen as staff tensions; however, there are no longer these "tensions" at Kennedy because of new leadership. How is anything going to change if the district is not willing to admit they did not provide quality staff leadership? Teachers do not feel safe to do their job, and since this trust has been broken only a change in leadership will impact it. Since no one really knows what exactly was done to cause this move, teachers are walking on eggshells. This means innovation in many places has stalled, because people are afraid to put ideas and questions out there for fear they will be seen negatively by leadership.

I stand by everything I say here, and I'm only saying it now because I know I'm never coming back to Cupertino, and I have quit teaching for now. This experience makes me very wary of giving my time and energy to another district. The staff though is the only reason I would return to teaching. I've never worked with more people who valued each other and valued their work. It was amazing to come together for this common cause, and it unified us all. It was sad that a few people with all the power almost ruined that school. They certainly ruined the lives and careers of at least a dozen people. I'm just proud of my colleagues that through it all, they kept moving forward. Please believe me that the silent protests and secret union meetings were the absolute last resort for us. It was the only thing we could do to get our voices heard and to attempt to right all of these wrongs, and to get back to the work of

teaching, which is what they have done under new leadership.

I am confident that the WV teachers (and not even all) were doing the only things they could to make the madness stop. Wendy learned a lesson from Kennedy and this move proves she does not support your teachers. She'd rather keep the bad apples and waste your money than admit her people made a mistake and need help managing. This move to try to ruin the careers of these teachers without just cause has caused divisive and permanent damage to staff and consequently the community. She cannot deny that.

I suppose now the only thing the parent community can do is to continue to support their teachers, and to continue to ask questions of leadership. Parents should ask about the assessment process for administrators. Who is checking on them? Who is assessing them? Who is assessing improvement plans to ensure teachers who need them get the support they need to be successful? Is there a system of checks and balances for administrators? The only thing we could do as teachers was fill out the CEA principal survey. We did this every year, and yet the district never looked at the results. Why? Why wouldn't you want to really know how your principal is doing? After all, teachers are assessed via a parent and student survey, so why not principals? (Several teachers reported the use of these surveys to justify improvement plans, even though we were told publicly time and time again the results could not be used in evaluations.)

The support the parent community has shown over the years is quite overwhelming. I talk about it a lot to people I meet - how we were viewed as special people, how we were showered with praises and gifts, how in a matter of weeks parents banded together to save 200 jobs. I have never seen a parent community provide more support, empathy, and appreciation. I cannot tell you how that makes us all feel everyday.

Ramey Wells  
Former Kennedy 6th grade teacher  
8years