

## The Online Lies That Grew and Grew

An old adage advises that if you do not have anything nice to say, you should not say anything at all. In today's social media universe, however—where some consider etiquette, tact, and self-restraint to be irrelevant—such a suggestion might be viewed as quaint. Furthermore, social media have become an easy avenue for troublemakers, often cloaked by anonymity, to skewer others by making malicious accusations without offering evidence to support them. In the following case, an incoming high school principal new to the district is blindsided by spiteful, unfounded rumors posted about her online as she tries to settle into her administrative role. Although the protagonist in this case study is a principal, any educator at any level could potentially face a similar situation.

### THE CASE

#### The Championship-Coach-Turned-Principal

Aqua Springs High School (ASHS) in a suburb of the city of Springstone Bluff was built in 2007 and opened in 2008 to accommodate the school district's growing student population. Its first principal was Coach Monnett, a beloved coach who had served for twenty-one years at the district's Lonesome Lake High School before going straight to his first principalship, at ASHS. He was renowned locally for leading Lonesome Lake's football team, the Lions, to three regional and four state championships during his last seven years there, and when the district's board redrew school boundaries to include the new high school, many of the students and families he had known at Lonesome Lake High were shifted to ASHS's jurisdiction. Because of his

lengthy winning streak with the Lions, the entire city was happy to see the revered coach promoted to ASHS principal, even though he had no prior experience as an administrator. It turned out that his leadership style was so laissez-faire that it was almost nonexistent, but his many supporters tended to overlook his administrative shortcomings.

For four years, Coach Monnett led ASHS by delegating all his duties and spending most days at the local coffee shop, visiting with parents and other community members. At times, one could find "Coach" on the golf course with city council members who were lifelong friends of his, talking about the good old days or upcoming family events. Whenever issues arose at ASHS, the assistant principals (APs) and secretaries handled them and eventually were seen as the school's true leaders. Although no major problems occurred under Coach's leadership, ASHS was becoming known as a school where "the inmates were running the asylum," because it did not have a "real" principal.

During the summer before Coach Monnett's fifth year as principal, the district superintendent retired, and a new superintendent, Dr. Hiram Gregory, was hired. The school board charged Dr. Gregory with reviewing the principal at each campus and making recommendations about contract renewals and non-renewals for the following year. Although the board members did not give Dr. Gregory a reason for performing this particular task, they stressed that some campuses were not as successful as they had hoped.

Within the first few months of observing the administration at ASHS in Coach Monnett's fifth year as a principal, Dr. Gregory clearly understood the school board's concerns about principal contracts, even though the board had not specifically mentioned Coach Monnett. Dr. Gregory had visited each campus in the district twice within the first three months of the school year, and each time he visited ASHS, Coach Monnett was not available. Both times, his secretary told Dr. Gregory that the principal was in meetings. During his third visit in late January to ASHS, Dr. Gregory asked whether Coach was on campus, and when the secretary again replied that he was in a meeting, the superintendent told her to call him and tell him to get to the campus ASAP. Within twenty minutes, Coach was in his office with Dr. Gregory.

Through this impromptu meeting, it became obvious to Dr. Gregory that Coach Monnett was unfamiliar with the curriculum that was being taught at ASHS, what the Student Code of Conduct stated about suspensions and expulsions, or which state assessments the students would take throughout the year. Additionally, when Dr. Gregory asked Coach which teachers on his campus could be classified as master, skilled, and unskilled, the principal could not answer. After the meeting, Coach Monnett was given notice that his contract would not be renewed for the

upcoming year. As his contract was up for renewal that year anyway, no settlement or breaking of his contract would occur, and he decided to simply retire.

### The New ASHS Principal

Mrs. Sally Tacumah started her education career in a suburb of a large city seventeen years ago. She taught tenth-grade advanced placement world history for four years and eleventh-grade advanced placement United States history for seven years. Recognized as a strong and masterful teacher, she was promoted to assistant principal at the same high school, and she was quite successful and well respected during her six years in that position. Last June she decided to take a principalship in the suburb of Aqua Springs, where a friend and former colleague of hers, Dr. Gregory, was now superintendent.

After the decision was made not to renew Coach Monnett's contract as principal of ASHS, Superintendent Gregory knew instantly whom he wanted to lead the school: Sally Tacumah. As her superior during her time as a teacher and an AP, he had always had high hopes for her, and he knew she could help the students and teachers of ASHS to be successful in the upcoming school year. He also knew, however, that some parents and city council members believed that Coach Monnett—"the greatest coach," in their opinion—was being mistreated by not having his principal's contract renewed, and around the city, sentiments toward himself as superintendent had become divisive. He hoped that the animosity some people felt toward him would not affect Mrs. Tacumah or ASHS.

Mrs. Tacumah was looking forward to starting her principalship under Dr. Gregory's leadership, and she wanted to get to know the teachers before ASHS started its sixth year in existence. While collaborating with the school's teachers over the summer, she had found many areas that needed attention, such as the curriculum, student performance, assessments, and teacher evaluations. She hoped that with the staff, students, parents, and community members working together, ASHS would be transformed in beneficial ways. Many teachers had told her that they were ready for a change at ASHS, and after she began serving as principal, numerous people throughout the community praised her efforts.

Not everyone, however, thought that Mrs. Tacumah was a good thing for ASHS. In fact, people she did not even know were making defamatory statements about her, especially through a blog on the city newspaper's website. Although the blog posts about her focused on positive aspects of her new position, some community members attacked her from the beginning in comments on the blog, as the following examples show.

SpringstoneTribune.com  
*School Talk*

New Principal at Aqua Springs HS: Sally Tacumah

*Posted by the Tribune Newshound on August 13*

The school year is about to start, and a new principal will be at the helm of Aqua Springs High School, since Coach Monnett retired last year. I'm told that the staff of ASHS are eager to welcome Sally Tacumah as their new administrator. She comes to ASHS with a background as a classroom teacher and an assistant principal and is likely to bring a new leadership style to the campus. Good luck, Mrs. Tacumah!

Comments

*Posted by GR8123*

School hasn't even started and already I miss Coach Monnett. I don't know this new principal, but I heard she has only been a teacher for 4 years and hasn't really been an assistant principal. WHY IS SHE THE PRINCIPAL OF AQUA SPRINGS HIGH SCHOOL?? AND WHAT'S UP WITH HER LAST NAME? IS SHE AN INDIAN?

*Posted by silly mood*

I heard that Sally is on her third marriage. What a loser!

*Posted by Batboy12*

I think she's been a teacher longer than 4 years, because she looks really old. I bet she won't be able to handle ASHS. I think she's an American Indian.

The second blog:

SpringstoneTribune.com  
*School Talk*

Aqua Springs HS Is Off to a Good Start

*Posted by the Tribune Newshound on September 20*

It is Dr. Gregory's second year as Springstone Bluff's superintendent of schools, and he has already made some good decisions that have boosted student performance in the district. His most recent good decision was the appointment of Sally Tacumah as the principal of Aqua Springs High School. She seems to be well liked already—the teachers and students affectionately call her “Mrs. T.” This school year promises to be a good one, and these good vibes are due to the decisions made by our superintendent and elected school board. Next time you see one of these folks, give him or her a high-five.

Comments

*Posted by silly mood*

Just got off the phone with a reliable source who told me that the new superintendent and the new ASHS principal are having an affair, and that's

how she got the job! Aaarrggghhhhhh!!! The school board obviously didn't know this when they brought Dr. Gregory in.

*Posted by 2hazy2day*

All I need to know is: what will she do at ASHS that Coach Monnett hasn't? She can't live up to all that he has done for this city and this school district. We are all with you, Coach! #hatetacumah

The third blog:

SpringstoneTribune.com

*School Talk*

Is Mrs. T the Right Fit for Aqua Springs HS?

*Posted by the Tribune Newshound on October 27*

Not everyone loves Mrs. T after all. It is understandable that when an esteemed coach retires and is replaced with an "outsider," some parents might not be very happy about it. But when the outsider has proven to be genuine in how she conducts school business, the least we can do is give her a chance. Dr. Gregory and the board of trustees knew what they were doing when they hired Mrs. T, so let's give her time to implement her plans for ASHS. Many teachers, students, and parents feel that she has already demonstrated that she is capable and dedicated.

Comments

*Posted by GR8123*

How can you give someone a chance when she doesn't give my own kids a chance!? My kids came home and said they hate Mrs. Tacumah. They said she is an idiot. #hatetacumah #standupforourkids #coachmonnettrock

*Posted by EATBeef*

Come on. We all need to give Mrs. Tacumah the same chance we gave Coach Monnett when he started as principal. She seems to be someone who can help our kids and teachers do better. Let's give her some time before we judge her.

*Posted by Batboy12*

Hey, EATBeef, you obviously didn't grow up here, so you don't know what this community needs—and we don't need Sally Tacumah here. She is an OUTSIDER! Next time, just keep your thoughts to yourself. #outsidergohome

*Posted by EATBeef*

It's a sad day when people try to censor those who don't agree with them. I hope only the best for this community, our children, and Mrs. Tacumah.

*Posted by Batboy12*

You're not listening, EATBeef! Go back to where you came from! OUTSIDER! #outsidergohome #hatetacumah

Mrs. T wasn't sure where the disdain expressed in the blog comments was coming from, and she felt helpless in controlling the attacks, because most were made online rather than face-to-face. Although she felt certain that she had the support of the majority of teachers, students, and parents, the barrage of lies and unfounded gossip was beginning to weigh on her. After she had been on the job only a couple of months, another disturbing development was announced on the *School Talk* blog.

The fourth blog:

SpringstoneTribune.com  
*School Talk*

Petition Started to Oust Principal Sally Tacumah

*Posted by the Tribune Newshound on November 15*

Some community members have sent letters to the editor of the *Tribune*, claiming that they have started a petition to remove Sally Tacumah as the principal of Aqua Springs High. The *Tribune* has also received unconfirmed reports that one city council member is ready to sign the petition. A question that must be asked is, What has Mrs. T done to displease the creators of this petition?

A band of parents and teachers who support Mrs. T is also organizing. They believe that she is the best thing that has happened to ASHS in years, and they are prepared to start their own petition to keep Mrs. T on as their principal. We'll keep you posted on breaking news about this saga at ASHS.

Comments

*Posted by silly mood*

Just heard that "some" city council members (not just one) are petitioning to get rid of Mrs. Tacumah. Yes! #supportourkids #ridtacumah #staystrong

The fifth blog:

SpringstoneTribune.com  
*School Talk*

Support for Sally Tacumah at Aqua Springs HS

*Posted by the Tribune Newshound on December 2*

What should have been the start of a good school year for a new principal and her staff and students has been sidetracked by a witch hunt based on nothing but hearsay. Although this witch hunt seems to have fizzled, some disgruntled parents still want Mrs. T removed from the ASHS principalship. One must ask whether the real reason for all of this uproar is that some people truly believe that Mrs. T isn't a good principal, or is it that Coach Monnett had to leave ASHS because his lack of leadership was detrimental to ASHS? Has any actual evidence been uncovered that points to the need to fire Mrs. T?

Comments

*Posted by silly mood*

Look, the evidence is in the way Mrs. T carries herself. I can plainly see that Mrs. T is self-absorbed and uncaring. She took this principal's position because she had nowhere else to go. And she took it knowing that our favorite coach was being forced to retire. What did she think would happen? AND what is detrimental to ASHS is this woman who just needs to go! #firedacumah

*Posted by LooseLips*

It has been more than two weeks since silly mood said that a petition was going around to remove Mrs. Tacumah and that city council members were going to sign it. I haven't seen it, but I want to sign it. I don't know Mrs. Tacumah, because my kids are in elementary school, but I am convinced that she needs to go, based on the comments on this blog and the unflattering rumors I have heard. My children deserve a better principal. Bring Coach Monnett back!!! #firedacumah #supportourkids

*Posted by silly mood*

Hey, everyone--great news! The next school board meeting will be on December 11, and we need as many people to come and rally against Sally Tacumah. And bring signs with you to show that we want to get rid of her! #firedacumah #outsidergohome #hatetacumah

*Posted by EATBeef*

Can someone please explain why Mrs. Tacumah is being petitioned against? I have two kids at ASHS and they love her. From what I have heard from teachers and other parents, she is already changing ASHS into a school that everyone wants to be a part of. She has been praised as the first REAL principal of ASHS, because she stays on campus and is very accessible. She meets and greets everyone who comes on campus.

*Posted by 2hazy2day*

Look, EATBeef. It is simple to understand. We all grew up with Coach Monnett and respect his coaching and leadership skills, especially since he took our football team to state four years in a row. He should have been allowed to stay at ASHS until he really wanted to retire. He had enough assistant principals and secretaries taking care of things when he wasn't around, and the school was just fine. Then the new superintendent goes and replaces this great man with a woman? Do you understand now? #bringbackmonnett #firedacumah

*Posted by Batboy12*

I'll be there, silly mood! We already have 5 signs made! EATBeef, nobody cares what you think, so just shut up! #outsidergohome #bringbackmonnett #firedacumah

### The "Plan of Action"

"How am I supposed to perform my job well when I have so much opposition in the community?" Mrs. Tacumah lamented to her husband. "Being a teacher was so much easier than being a principal." She recalled that even her time as an AP was more rewarding than her time as the ASHS principal had been so far. Although the teachers and students have been very supportive of her, the whispers, pointing, and looks of disgust from unhappy community members at school games and elsewhere have been disconcerting and discouraging.

After reading the latest blog comments about herself and the petition against her, Mrs. Tacumah made an appointment with Dr. Gregory to discuss a plan of action for addressing the ongoing attacks. Despite her critics, Mrs. Tacumah has generally been happy at ASHS because, overall, people have been welcoming, friendly, and eager to have a collaborative leader. Even though the negative blog comments have had only a minimal effect on the school environment, she still wants to do something about them.

When the two administrators met, Dr. Gregory was surprised to hear that some individuals in the community were attacking Mrs. T through the *School Talk* blog, even though they did not really know her—and chose not to get to know her. The few community members who had complained to him at football games, Rotary Club meetings, church, and other places had no evidence to support their assertions. Furthermore, most of the complaints came from people who did not have any children attending ASHS. This phenomenon was a strange one, in his opinion, and he did not know exactly how to guide Mrs. T toward a positive resolution. The plan of action they decided on—to simply wait and ride out this insanity—was not much of a plan and did not involve much action. And if it were true that city council members were getting involved, their influence was likely to be felt at the school board meeting on December 11. The board president did ask Dr. Gregory to meet with him before then so that they could discuss Mrs. T's future at ASHS. Dr. Gregory was determined to fight to keep her as the ASHS principal and to demand that her sterling career not be blemished by unfounded accusations.

### WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?

The following is a brief insight into the issues presented in the case study, with a brief literature review to help give context to those issues.

#### Slander, Libel, and Social Media

Curiosity from the school community (i.e., students, parents, other educators) about new persons on a campus is something to be expected.



Trying to find out what a new educator's interests are, for example, is usually done through questions from a school community who just want to get to know the "new guy." New educators on a campus may be asked whether they are married, whether they have children, whether they are religious, and whether they have a political preference. Although these questions can be seen as an invasion of privacy, typically, the point of the questions is to find out how the new educator will fit within the school family.

The high visibility of educators also brings this curiosity, because educators, in a sense, are public figures. As a public figure, one may think that it is your duty to answer questions from curious school community members, to be sure that you measure up to standards. Sadly, when school community members do not get answers, or at least the ones they expect to hear, they may begin to create answers, or "talk" about an educator.

Hence, the high visibility of educators is much like being a celebrity, and to some students and parents, educators' lives should be an open book; educators, after all, are working with others' children.

For those educators who experience talk that is slanderous or libelous, keep in mind the following. First, many courts have ruled that expressing negative opinions about persons in high-visibility positions, such as school administrators and other educators, is not illegal as long as the opinions are factual and do not interfere with those persons' job duties. Thus, school administrators and other educators whose jobs are inherently high profile must accept that teachers, students, and parents are free to criticize them. Not all high-profile educators accept this freedom of critics.

For instance, an influx of lawsuits has been levied by coaches against parents due to "...defamation, false light, invasion of privacy, intentional infliction of emotional distress, and malicious prosecution" (Green, 2014, p. 11). In 2009, one case in Connecticut involved a high school swim coach successfully winning an \$88,000 judgment against a swimmer's mother who falsely alleged that the coach was a pedophile; whereas in 2005, a Chicago high school baseball coach won an \$800,000 judgment after a parent fabricated and sent fake press releases to print and broadcast media outlets falsely claiming the coach was under investigation by the state's high school association for inappropriate coaching practices (Green, 2014). These examples show that some highly visible or high-profile educators are not accepting that nothing can be done about slander and libel.

If an educator wishes to sue someone for defamation, certain criteria must be met. Plaintiffs in a slander or libel suit must show that their reputation has been sullied, their ability to perform their job duties has been made more difficult, and their ability to gain another job has diminished. Consider that when a person makes the decision to sue another for defamation, McDaniel (2002) affirmed that

...that one individual may not harm another's reputation by false statements about his or her character....When words unjustly impute to another such qualities as immorality, vice, or dishonorable conduct, resulting in a loss of respect or esteem in the community, there may be grounds for a defamation suit. (pp. 34–35)

Examples of such cases where slander or libel lawsuits made it to the courts include *Blue Mountain School District v. Snyder* (2012); *Layshock ex rel. Layshock v. Hermitage School District* (2012); *Jerri Sharpton v. Blanca and Eddie Diaz* (2011); and *Draker v. Schreiber* (Texas Appeals—San Antonio, 2008).

Keep in mind that some parents and students may simply not like educators whose job includes disciplining students. Those disciplinarians may be called unflattering names, and rumors about them may start after a student is disciplined. Unless such criticism and rumors affect the learning environment and the administrator's ability to keep order on a campus, little can be done without possibly making the situation bigger and worse. And even if unfounded criticism from one parent is addressed, other parents may take his or her place. As high-profile persons, educators learn to have strong spines and thick skin.

When it comes to blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media, it is best to follow state laws and school district policies if you are faced with online defamation. Some states address electronic communication through their educational or penal codes, which school districts uphold through their employee and student handbooks. Codes regarding electronic communications are not as stringent as they should be, however, because these media are relatively new and continually evolving.

What social media open up—specifically for slander and libel to occur—is that no longer is the school community confined to the school building; it now includes the peripheral outsiders in cyberworld. These peripheral outsiders are given chances to communicate their likes or distaste of a person purely based on a social media friend's insight. This expansion of the school community can cause defamation to have the potential of coming from persons who have and never will meet the person they are defaming.

"Cyberspace is not an area where laws do not apply...it is easy to say something in poor taste online, without seeing or appreciating the emotional consequences of an action" (Gillespie, 2012, p. 369). This is what occurs when a community of bloggers reacts to a principal without having all the facts; emotions compel poor taste.

Social media encourage slander and libel: slander, through videos and spoken dialogue, and libel, through anything in print. More social defamation lawsuits are on the horizon, which confirms two things: There are more opportunities for individuals to be victims of social defamation

through the use of an online environment, and the laws have not caught up to the many violations of poor taste through the internet (i.e., victim, Internet service provider, and sender of information may be in different jurisdictions; Hiroko, 2013).

### Outside Influences

Do outsiders, such as city council members, have an impact on a school district? Although outside parties may sometimes have an indirect impact on a district's policies and decisions, such outsiders do not have the legal authority to force their wishes on a school board.

In this case study, some community members view Mrs. Tacumah as an outsider, not only because she came from another city but because she replaced a local icon. They perceive her as a threat to the status quo, and they believe that her relative unfamiliarity with the community makes her incapable and undeserving of leading ASHS. For Mrs. T—and any educator who is new to a campus or district—the best antidote to such fears and criticism is visibility, through frequent and public interaction with community members. The following suggestions could be elements of an action plan to help an incoming educator gain the community's acceptance:

- Attend community events, participate in charitable fundraisers, patronize local shops and restaurants, and visit various churches.
- Join and be active in local organizations to show a desire to be a positive influence within the community. For example, volunteering at a local food bank will demonstrate an educator's caring and compassion, and joining the ethnic organizations represented within the community will demonstrate support of and commitment to cultural diversity.
- When participating in community activities, always be genuine and transparent. Educators who enjoy their role outside the school as much as their role within it will not feel forced or insincere as they go about making themselves more visible.

### NCZ—NO CONSEQUENCE ZONE

Answer the questions below by applying what you know about this case and thinking about the steps you would take if you were faced with this situation or a similar one.

- 1 New superintendents routinely are tasked with making changes in their school district. Frequently they are given carte blanche to bring in their own people to lead schools or departments at the central office

level. This hiring freedom is usually a bargaining chip that an incoming superintendent negotiates before accepting the position.

- a. How did Dr. Gregory's change of principal at ASHS affect the school and the community?
  - b. What were the social and political implications of that decision for Dr. Gregory?
- 2 New principals always have some obstacles to overcome, even if they have previously held a position in campus administration.
  - a. What were the immediate obstacles that Mrs. Tacumah faced when she began her principalship?
  - b. What are the obstacles for her after four months on the job?
  - c. What might be obstacles for her as she nears the end of the school year and starts her second year at ASHS?
- 3 Persons who incite havoc on social media and make personal attacks online can be difficult to deal with, especially if they are anonymous.
  - a. How should new principals handle lies or miscommunications about their experience or why they were hired?
  - b. What should Mrs. Tacumah do about the false accusations made about her in comments on the *School Talk* blog?
  - c. Should the teachers at ASHS try to do anything about the attacks being made on Mrs. Tacumah on the *School Talk* blog? If so, what might they do?
- 4 Being a new administrator on a campus and within a school district can be both exciting and intimidating. Introducing your own philosophy and ideas may be more easily accomplished if you encourage collaboration with and among the administrative staff and teachers.
  - a. How can Mrs. Tacumah (or any new educator) acclimate successfully to the campus and the district?
  - b. How could the assistant principals at ASHS go about informing Mrs. Tacumah of their duties and the campus procedures under the former principal? How can Mrs. Tacumah gain the trust of the APs, and what steps could she take to help them adjust to any new expectations she has of them?
  - c. What can teachers do to help a new principal fit in with the established culture on a campus?
  - d. What can a new principal do to be accepted as part of an existing campus family?
- 5 Now consider some big-picture questions about this case.
  - a. What lasting effects might the ill will of the complaining community members have on Mrs. Tacumah and her career?
  - b. Could the actions of the parents and other community members who are opposed to Mrs. Tacumah as principal have any negative consequences for them?

- c. How would you expect a similar situation to play out in your own district and community?

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