



TEACHING OPPOSITES MEDIATION

Confidential Information for Dale Watkins, Teacher

You are 45 years old, and have been teaching at the Catholic middle school for twenty years. You and your spouse are Catholic, proud products of Catholic schools and working-class families. You resent people like PJ Gannon, who think they can waltz into a middle school with a British accent and an ivy league pedigree and carry the poor working stiffs into the glory of “higher standards.” What a little snot PJ is! While you recognize that grammar has its place, you believe that learning to enjoy reading and literature, thinking critically, and engaging with the texts is far more important for students. Nit-pickers write tidy papers but lack ideas. You also believe when a teacher is unduly critical of students’ writing, they become afraid to express their ideas. Writing and analyzing become unpleasant tasks. Thus, you and PJ rarely agreed in English department faculty meetings. However, you were always professional and cordial, even if you had no interest in brown bagging next to PJ in the lunchroom.

You spent an entire year biting your tongue about PJ while your son Martin was assigned to PJ’s eighth grade English class. While Martin was a typical teenage boy, sometimes obnoxious, he is not stupid. A decent teacher would have found a way to engage him, rather than criticize him constantly in class. Martin told you that, PJ would “snottily” lecture the class about the importance of neatness and “clean” sentence structure. In the middle, PJ would look at him, say “are you listening, Martin?” in a mean, sarcastic tone. He was humiliated. You did not say anything to PJ or to the principal about it because you feared PJ would take it out on Martin and his grade. In fact, you doubted that PJ ever read Martin’s papers for their content. PJ must have been much too busy marking them up in red ink. No wonder Martin’s papers became shorter and shorter; he was completely dispirited. When PJ suggested a “parent teacher conference on Martin’s writing” in written comments on one of his papers, you were outraged. Why didn’t PJ bother to just talk to you as a colleague? You certainly weren’t going to sit like a parent and listen to an insipid lecture.

Martin’s eighth grade year was very difficult overall. He was feeling physically awkward, growing gangly and a bit pimply. having some social difficulties and struggling with organizing and managing the heavier schoolwork load. Martin is a very bright boy, but he is a boy and doesn’t quite have his act together. You care that he continues to be curious, to read, and to be engaged. PJ Perfection Gannon is just married and has no children. PJ and one or two of Martin’s other teachers were so hard on him, that he became more difficult at home and began to hate school. Ninth grade is somewhat better, but you blame many of Martin’s current troubles on his disastrous eighth grade experience, in which PJ Gannon played a large part.

You were absolutely outraged when you entered your classroom and found PJ Gannon pawing through your personal things in your tote bag on your desk, late one afternoon. It was about fifteen minutes after the school day. You had stopped by the school gym on your



way out to the parking lot and spent time chatting with the gym teacher. When you realize you left your keys in your bag in the classroom. you raced down the hallway to get there before the janitor locked the classroom doors. You ran in, pulled the door open, and saw PJ. PJ was holding your tote bag with its batch of student papers, books, your wallet, some prescription medicine, and other personal items. What outrageous nerve! A complete and brazen violation of your privacy!

When you said, “drop the bag,” and grabbed it from PJ’s hands, PJ pushed you - HARD. PJ then grabbed the back of the heavy metal desk chair with both hands and started to lift it, clearly intending to hit you with the chair. You told PJ not to touch the chair and to back away. When PJ refused, you swung at them with your tote bag, to avoid being rammed by the chair. The chair must have been heavy, because PJ then fell backward onto the floor, screaming (though there were no injuries). Then PJ started stammering and sputtering something about needing the grammar book. You said that no one has a right to go into your classroom and to steal from your bag, “not even Princeton nitwits. “

That thief then went into a completely offensive self-righteousness rant and started lecturing you about keeping student papers too long. At first, you just ignored it. How DARE PJ tell you how to manage your work?! Then you realized that this was the little snot’s strategy. It was all about blackmail and a good offense. PJ was afraid you would report the incident to the principal. That explains why PJ offered not to report you for late papers if you handed them back soon. PJ must have thought the late papers were “evidence” against you and was threatening to use it.

Over the next few days, PJ repeatedly asked you how the student papers were going. You ignored it. A week later, PJ again asked you about the papers, and even had the nerve to suggest you might want help with them. You blew up and told PJ to stop harassing you. You decided to make a formal complaint.

You were outraged but hardly surprised when PJ then made a counter-complaint against you for professional misconduct and incompetence (apparently based upon the alleged assault and the ungraded student papers).

(If pressed about the papers, assume that they were submitted by the students at the beginning of the school year. You had originally planned to mark them up and hand them back. While the student’s ideas weren’t too bad, the grammar and sentence structure were indeed atrocious – unacceptable even for you. It would have taken unbelievable time to go through them carefully. Your home life has been extremely difficult, as your husband is a fireman and was injured several months ago. His recovery has been slow. You have run the household and done all chauffeuring for your three kids. You finally decided to hold onto the student papers, consider them as the “baseline,” and teach a unit to address the most prevalent problems. You were reviewing the eighth-grade grammar text to see how it presented certain concepts. After that unit, each student’s paper would be compared to that originally submitted, to determine whether the student had made progress. No grades would be recorded for the initial papers.)



Your Core Concerns and Behaviors in Mediation

Status: You feel that PJ is considered “higher status” because PJ went to an Ivy League School and clearly comes from an upper-class background. You are also aware that people know your spouse is a firefighter, with only a high school education, and PJ is an engineer. Within the school, you sometimes feel people defer to PJ, listening to PJ’s views over yours. PJ seems to be on a “fast track” while you have been in the same career place for a long time. You also think people look down on you because of Martin’s shortcomings, as if his poor school performance is a reflection of your failure as a parent or your inferior intellect or work habits.

If PJ or the mediator makes ANY comment reflecting the status differential, you will be very angry.

Appreciation:

You feel that no one values the type of openness and enthusiasm for literature and expression that you promote in your classroom. They are tied up over grammar and rules and think your approach is inferior. You think that kids learn to write from reading, and comparing their writing to those of the greats, not only from a teacher’s red pen.

Autonomy:

PJ’s intrusion into your things was an invasion of your space and your privacy. PJ’s repeated exhortations to hand back the papers were a brazen attempt to tell you what to do as a teacher.

Behaviors you might exhibit in the mediation:

Insist on talking about PJ’s stealing your bag and papers FIRST in the mediation,

Dismiss PJ’s explanation of their motives as ridiculous.

Insist PJ admits coming into your classroom to look through your things; that is not allowed.

Attack/denigrate the validity of PJ’s teaching priorities.

Insult PJ’s “prissiness” or “snottiness.”

(If you can work it in) State that PJ has no business teaching in a Catholic school when they are not Catholic, and PJ’s spouse is not a Christian.

At some point, withdraw from the dialogue (because you feel it’s stacked against you).