



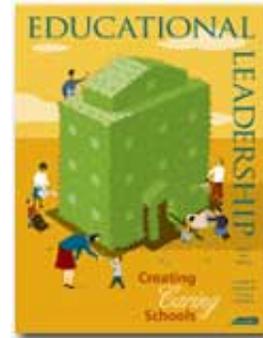
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Creating Caring Schools Pages 76-79

Principals Who Care: A Personal Reflection

The school leader holds the key to creating a caring community in which learning flourishes.

Joanne Rooney

The retirement party celebrating my 19 years of leadership at a small, suburban elementary school was nostalgic and funny. Teachers roasted my many idiosyncrasies and told stories that merely shadowed reality. The celebration marked the end of a long career in public school leadership.



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We had a good school, filled with highly professional teachers and with students who learned well. The staff strove to reach decisions collaboratively. A multi-million-dollar addition to the school rose like a phoenix out of a year's worth of construction dust. High achievement scores, few discipline problems, and active parent involvement all shared space in our trophy case of accomplishments. Yet the many quiet conversations and written messages that came my way on my retirement suggested that "successful" school leadership went beyond these conventional achievements.

These communications most often referred to memories of the personal interactions that dotted the landscape of my career. Philip wrote a note thanking me for "squeezing in" a personal day so that he could attend the funeral of a friend's dad. Barb remembered leaving midday to care for her sick son at my insistence, while I subbed for her. Parents recalled phone calls that assured them that their kindergarten child had indeed stopped crying or that Billy had had a fight-free noon recess. We reminisced about students and about personal milestones. Above all, we remembered that we had cared—for one another and together for kids.

As all principals do, I spent much time on little things: greeting students by name (and not confusing them with their brothers or sisters); accepting birthday cupcakes as though each was the first; walking new students personally to classrooms; and inquiring about the health of a teacher's parent, spouse, or child. I helped celebrate pregnancies and births, rushed students (and teachers) to the emergency room, and insisted that teachers take much-needed mental health days. Through these multiple connections, every principal has the power to weave an environment in which people care for one another—and thereby to foster excellent teaching and learning.

Good principals model care. Their words and behavior explicitly show that caring is not optional. Nothing can substitute for this leadership. Phoniness doesn't cut it. No principal

can ask any teacher, student, or parent to travel down the uncertain path of caring if the principal will not lead the way.

Evans (1996) affirms what we instinctively know: Authentic leadership comes from the core commitments that lie within the leader, not from external tomes or mandated standards. Caring stands first in the long line of those commitments.

Balancing Conflicting Demands

Amid the complex expectations crowding the principal's day, the challenge of leading a caring school can seem daunting. However different their schools, all principals wrestle with challenges that can overwhelm even the heroic. Principals often arrive at school before anyone else in the morning and return home just in time for the 10 o'clock news. They spend their days like firefighters in a dry summer forest, putting out one conflagration only to see several others break out in new and unforeseen spots. Paperwork proliferates and waits for their attention on the weekends. Phone messages—always marked "urgent"—litter desks already scattered with complex reports, endless data, and the occasional note saying "Call the superintendent immediately!"

In addition, paradoxical demands define the principalship. Principals must create communities that "learn with heart," but they must also run "tight ships." Principals have to "lead with soul" but still make hardheaded decisions about hiring and firing. Principals facilitate learning organizations, yet they have little time or resources for their own professional development.

Principals are teachers, counselors, parent figures, and, at times, plumbers and police. Despite the apparent contradictions in their roles, good principals care for students, teachers, and all the other lives that intersect within this place called school. They care passionately and without reserve.

Shielding the School from Outside Pressures

Caring principals do their best to protect their staff and students from external forces that do not foster a culture of learning and caring. Principals often act as mediators among politicians, the media, business leaders, and educators.

Ever since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, politicians wooing voters have made problems in education into a well-publicized priority. Goodlad tells us that the politicians' "trick is to keep alive and well the message that our schools are failing" (2002, p. 18). If the public did not believe that schools desperately needed to improve, many governors and legislators would lose a crucial issue that supports their political careers.

Whenever murders and violence fail to fill up daily headlines, bad news about education provides fodder for the press. The cry of "failing schools" sells papers and fills two-minute sound bites on the late-night news. The fallout from media reports eventually lands on the principal's desk.

The business world, now in some disarray, has suggested for decades that schools should follow the business model and use the bottom line as a barometer of success. "If it cannot be measured, it does not exist," say those enamored of test data as the single indicator of student learning.

But caring principals refuse to reduce the complex and personal assessment of learning to simplistic charts and graphs mailed from commercial testing companies. They understand that real learning is painted with a multi-colored palette and assessed with equal parts of artistic and mathematical exactness.

Care in schools involves what Evans (1996) calls *savvy* or Barth (2001) names *craft knowledge*. As middle manager, the principal stands between the school—its students and teachers—and those who see public education as a business or a political agenda. Like castle builders of long ago, caring principals erect protective walls to stave off the forces that want to use the school for purposes other than true learning.

Promoting Rigor

Let's be perfectly clear: A caring school is not a "soft" school. We must not confuse caring with sitting in a warm circle, holding hands, and singing "Kum Ba Ya." On the contrary, care involves a vigorous insistence on high expectations for students and teachers. Care rejects second-rate teaching and does not allow lame excuses for low achievement. Care requires a standard of equality for all students, regardless of how they look or what they bring to the schoolhouse door.

Good principals know that excellence in teaching leads to excellence in learning—and to high test scores. Competitively high scores, although not the end product we seek, naturally grow from a context of caring and excellence in instruction. Caring principals accept responsibility for both learning and the context in which it takes place—a tall order for the harried school leader.

Maintaining a Caring Mind-Set

Although caring principals spend their days doing the same administrative tasks that occupy all principals, they sort the diverse activities that crowd each day through the filter of caring intensely about people. Good principals view schools through the lens of caring. They use their caring perspective, or mind-set, to choose which battles to fight and to determine which pressing issues will occupy the "urgent and important" quadrant described by Covey (1994).

Good principals, then, embody the best of caring. They phone anxious parents, laugh at well-worn "knock-knock" jokes, weep over untimely deaths, and rage at the abuse of children under any guise. Caring principals have the courage to say no to parents who demand that the needs of their own child take precedence over the common well-being. They respond with "go for it" when teachers hesitate to take risks. Principals who care respect the wisdom of their staff members by involving them in decisions that shape their lives.

Caring principals speak up for their deeply held convictions about teaching and learning, and they let go of less important issues. They are wise enough to pick their battles judiciously. Schools that care have principals who care passionately for students, for their teachers, and for the right of every student to learn.

Schools are communities of human beings, bound together in an organic, continuously developing web of relationships. Barth (2001) and Sergiovanni (2001) teach that schools are communities of learners. Boyer (1995) tells us that without community, nothing else matters. Such communities cannot be created by authorities and experts outside the school who send down mandates and expectations from above. The wisdom of the good school must be worked out by those who live within its walls—in conversations about students, about teaching, and about learning. This dialogue includes all who participate in and enhance the community. When this work takes place in an environment of intense care, students learn and thrive and the impossible work of the principal becomes not only possible, but also deeply meaningful.

Moving On

My life has moved forward since my memorable retirement party. I now work with practicing principals in the Midwest Principals' Center. I also teach those who aspire to school leadership, and I sometimes have the honor of mentoring those newly appointed as principals.

The principals with whom I work are remarkable people. They share stories about improving teaching and learning and about providing opportunities for their teachers to grow as professionals. From deep within their frenetic lives comes a consistent, clear message: They love their jobs. The people with whom they work have become their second families.

These principals imbue their schools with a spirit that defies measurement. Above all, they lead schools of care because they are people who care. We salute them.

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