

Introduction: Four Stories of Caring School Leadership

We introduce the idea of caring school leadership with four stories written by practicing educators. These stories tell of real principals, teachers, students, and parents in actual school settings, and they are presented in the storyteller's voice. They capture vividly and concretely many key elements and practices of caring school leadership that we explore in the pages to come. These stories illustrate how principals can be caring in their interpersonal relationships with students, how they can cultivate their schools as caring communities, and how they can be caring in their work with teachers and parents. They point to the purposes of caring, key virtues and mindsets of caring, and important competencies that bring caring virtues and mindsets to life in school leaders' work.

These four stories come from an archive of true stories of caring in school leadership that we elicited from practicing and retired principals, assistant principals, teachers, and others with whom school leaders work. From this archive, we have assembled about 100 stories into a companion volume to this book, titled *Stories of Caring School Leadership*, also published by Corwin. We compiled this companion volume of stories to further illustrate, instruct, and inspire the practice of caring school leadership explored in this book. Like this book, the book of stories is designed for practicing and aspiring school leaders to read and reflect upon individually and in groups, for programs of school leader preparation and professional development, and for use with teachers and others to promote leadership development and improvement in schools. It contains tips for using the stories in each of these contexts.

Now, four stories will introduce the present book.

Ana

Ana had a *terrible* fear of separation from her parents that began when she was about one and a half. By preschool, she had made some progress, but leaving her mom, in particular, remained just as challenging as it was when she was a toddler. Ana would become extremely upset as they drove to school and would cry, scream, refuse to leave the car, throw herself down on the floor in the entry hall, and grab at her mom's legs and ankles to stop her from leaving. Ana *loved* school, but the moment of saying goodbye absolutely terrified her. It was not a rational fear, but young children often have irrational fears.

And those fears are just as big and real as any other. Ana is extremely bright and highly verbal and in need of some help.

I saw what was happening and how stressful it was on Ana's mom, her teachers, and Ana herself! We had tried some on-the-spot interventions but knew it was time for a plan. At some schools, staff might leave parents to figure out issues like this on their own, but we valued family and community. Ana's fears and her mom's struggles were ours, too. We had to support them.

We created a safe, soothing entry routine and designated some grown-ups on standby to help as necessary. We knew we had to have some flexibility and a few layers. Some days, a ride up in the elevator with my administrative assistant was enough to facilitate the transition. Other days, time in the soft spot—a rocking chair in a semiprivate corner, with stuffed animals and small and engaging toys—would do the trick. On more difficult days, we had a nook set up in a nearby storage closet. It might sound odd at first, but we decked out this little space like a bedroom for Ana and filled it with things that she loved: a giant teddy bear, some toys, a small chair, and soft blankets. It was a bit like a pillow fort, and it was just for Ana. This snug, secure, and private space allowed her to have her big feelings, to calm down, and then to rejoin the class. A team of three or four teachers took turns, using the same routine and language with Ana, quickly decreasing the time she needed in the nook before she could join the class.

We gave Ana a lot of positive affirmations. “We care so much about you, and we’re so glad you are in school today. I’m here, and I’ll just sit and do a little work while you take some time and let me know when you are ready to go. Why don’t you set five minutes on the timer and see how you’re feeling then?”

Sometimes, recognizing what a child needs and finding a way to provide it is all it takes. After a few weeks, most days, Ana transitioned without visiting the nook. And even when she used the nook, it was typically for less time than even the timer allowed. We gave Ana space to have her feelings and gave her support as she learned to *regulate* them. She can now enter class and have a successful day—loved, seen, and cared for.

—Told by a former preschool head

Giving and Taking the Chance

I stood at the graduation podium giving my speech. The moment was full of joy and pride in the year's graduating class. I had made a point that I would mention every senior by name in some special way, recalling fond memories, acknowledging growth, and sending well wishes for their future. I paused as I got to the next name in my speech. While I did not say it, this student had proven to have the greatest impact on my career up until that moment and still to this day.

My first encounter with her was in a hallway of the school, breaking up a fight she was in with another young lady. I knew her vaguely as one of the younger

students, a student with a bit of an attitude, and, at that moment, the center of an uproar in the middle of the hallway. In those few minutes, I judged her, and I assumed that she would be a problem next year when she got to the class I taught as one of my duties at the school. I assumed that she was another unmotivated, hard-to-reach troublemaker. The worst part was that I hadn't realized the degree to which I had negatively judged her in one instance until she came to my class the following year. She entered my room, and in our early conversations, I told her that I remembered she was the girl who got into that fight the previous year and that I hoped she didn't plan on bringing any of "that" into my classroom. In those few words, I created a wall of judgment. I never gave the girl a chance. And I couldn't have been more wrong about her.

The kid who entered my class looked the same and sounded the same as the year before, but the fact that I was now her teacher gave me the chance to get to know her. Her answers to questions were insightful, and her work habits were impeccable. She was driven, and I was compelled to do my part to make up for the wrong I had done and for all who had prejudged her before me. That year was full of ups and downs. I watched her conquer family challenges, the loss of friends, and the burden of providing for her family. But she continued to persevere and kept college on the forefront of her mind. I encouraged her and saw the hard shell she presented to the world begin to disappear. She became like a niece to me, and classroom lessons became infused with life lessons about being your best self and not giving up despite growing up in difficult circumstances. She laughed, she cried, and she got angry, and I promised her that if she did her part, she would find her place in college. She trusted me enough to tell me her dreams of one day being successful for her family, and she shared her fears that she would never achieve her dreams. I challenged her even harder, expected even more, and supported her every step of the way.

As I stood at the podium on that graduation day, I paused and then spoke her name. I announced to the audience of students, family members, and friends that I simply wanted to apologize. I wanted to apologize for not seeing the amazing student that she was, and I thanked her for giving me the opportunity to be a part of her journey. I thanked her for being a constant reminder that the future is what you make of it and greatness comes in all types of packages. I closed by congratulating her on the full scholarship she had received to attend a selective East Coast college. My own biases had almost hindered me from committing to and expressing the level of care necessary to see this student through to the finish.

I was reminded how important it is to care for our students when I received the following Facebook message from this former student five years later:

I just want to thank you for everything you have taught me and your seriousness when it came to being an educator. Many of the things you told me still stick with me today. Like "you might have to work 10x harder to get where some other people are at and you have to do what you have to do". Although I knew I was going to college,

I'm not sure if I would be where I am today without your influence. Thank you. P.S.: I will never forget the fact that you really thought I was a hood rat because of that fight. Lol!

—Told by a high school assistant principal

Seth

Meet Seth. Seth is the younger brother of Jack by one year, both adopted by two moms from Central America. I had the pleasure of teaching both boys, back to back. It wasn't easy being Jack's little brother. Jack was a rock star, excelling academically, athletically, and socially. Seth didn't have it as easy. Seth had a medical issue that caused tumors to grow in his little body, leaving his moms terrified and his brain having to work harder than anyone in my class—and perhaps in the school. Each week, Seth saw a speech and language pathologist, an occupational therapist, a speech therapist, and a math tutor. He struggled to speak clearly, write legibly, and finish any assignment with success. Amazingly, these hardships were not obvious when you met Seth. Seth was one of the happiest boys I ever taught. He said, "Good morning!" *with eye contact every day* as he entered the classroom, not the most common thing for a fourth-grader to do. He cared for his peers, as when he would rub their backs when they were sad and when he would come and tell me he was worried about his friends. He made people laugh. He participated in class discussions. Seth was someone every lower-school teacher wanted in their classroom. Seth was in the fourth grade, and next year, he would enter the middle school, and the big question that was on the table was whether Seth would continue to make it here.

Seth's moms knew that he struggled. It was undeniable. They were paying thousands of dollars on top of independent-school tuition just to get enough tutors and therapists to keep Seth's head above water. But Seth was part of our school community, and it terrified his moms that he might not be allowed to continue on at this school. They wanted him here. *We* wanted him here. But the most important question was what was best for Seth. When Julie, the head of the lower school, came to me in late October to schedule a "touch base" meeting with Seth's moms about his future, I knew it was going to be difficult. I knew the meeting was going to be frightening for Seth's moms.

The meeting was scheduled for after school. I was running around to get my fourth-graders into their cars and to get back up to the mailroom to grab the last of the coffee. As I swung open the door and dashed out of the mailroom, I almost slammed into Seth's mom, Robyn. "Hi!" I exclaimed. She barely looked at me as she quickly strode down the hall. "Can I get you some coffee?" I asked, trying to keep up with her. "No." She brushed me off and entered Julie's office with me trailing behind. This meeting was going to be worse than I thought.

I entered the office as Julie was offering a beverage to Mary, Seth's other mom. "Sure!" she said in a friendly reply. Robyn sat across from Mary, saying

nothing and still fuming. Mary looked across the table at Robyn and gave her a look to tell her to pull it together. To say it was awkward is an understatement. I just looked at Julie. After some awkward chitchat, Julie took the lead.

“Let’s just dive in,” Julie began. “How are you feeling about how everything is going for Seth?” That’s all it took for Robyn to explode. She sounded off about how everything is so easy for Jack and how that isn’t fair for Seth. She said she doesn’t know how to help Seth. She cursed. She was red faced. She was angry. She asked if I was the best teacher for Seth. That hit a nerve for me, and I became visibly upset by her question.

Mary stopped her and said fiercely, “Robyn, if you are going to act like this, leave!” It was the most raw parent emotion I have ever seen. Julie intervened. “Let’s take a step back. Let’s relax for a minute. We are here *for* Seth. So what do you want *for* Seth?” That’s when the tears started flowing. Robyn sat quietly wiping her eyes as Mary stepped in. “We want Seth to be happy. We want Seth to learn and be whatever he wants to be. We are scared for Seth. We are scared he won’t make it here.” The room was quiet.

Julie said, “We are not at this table to kick Seth out of this school. Let me be very clear. The question is how can we best support Seth?” I could feel the anger and fear leave the room. Julie’s tone calmed the moms. She wasn’t the authority figure in the room but rather a comforter and mediator to help the moms process Seth’s situation. Julie reminded us to think about how Seth was feeling about his experiences in school. Are his struggles overcoming his confidence? Does he love school? Julie insisted that we keep Seth’s feelings at the forefront of our conversation. This seemed to provide comfort for the moms.

Julie guided the conversation along. Her voice was calm and reassuring. She was fully present, focusing all her attention on the moms. There was no computer on the table, nor were there folders of information about Seth. Julie took no notes. It was all about making the personal connection and laying the foundation for future conversations and decision making. As she was talking, Julie gave examples of Seth’s experiences in school, about how she had gotten to know him by talking with him in the mornings when he was dropped off at school. She spoke about the things that made Seth happy. She was assuring the moms that Seth is known at school and that the school is being supportive and caring of him. There were no negatives spoken, only positives. Julie kept Seth at the center of the conversation. Julie spoke about how the moms could learn more about Seth’s strengths and struggles. She asked the moms for their insight into Seth and his condition. She asked the moms for their advice about what resources might be most helpful for Seth at school. Along the way, Julie put to rest Robyn’s concern about Seth being in my classroom, saying, “I would not want him anywhere else.” That meant a lot to me, as I hope it did to the moms.

We all hugged at the end of the meeting. We didn’t reach a decision about whether Seth would continue at the school next year. But Julie had established a connection with the moms that would make further conversations and the ability to make this decision less difficult. She was clear that we care

about Seth, that we care about his well-being, and that we care about his moms and how they are navigating their support for Seth. She was communicating the school's values of caring, openness, and support. This was enough for a first conversation.

A week later, the moms returned to school with packets of information about Seth's condition and about resources they thought the school should know about. They began to trust and open up to Julie and to me. They engaged more fully with Julie as partners in Seth's schooling. And two years later, at the time this story was written, Seth was still at the school, ready to enter the seventh grade.

—Told by an independent elementary school teacher

No One Graduates Alone

I had recently been named director of curriculum and assessment (9–12) for a network of charter schools. Having started as K–3 or K–5 schools and adding one grade per year, the Charter Management Organization had experience managing elementary schools but not high schools. At the time I was hired to lead curriculum development for the new ninth-graders who would start in the fall, I was the only staff member in the entire company who had ever taught in a high school. We were inexperienced, and we knew it.

Rory, the principal of the new high school, had been preparing for the role for several years. Hired as director of instruction in the middle school, he had assumed the title of principal over the seventh and eighth grades the previous year to prepare him to add the ninth grade the following year. In our planning, we wanted to make sure that ninth-grade students felt different—that ninth grade would not just be another year of middle school. We planned an orientation program during which students—about half continuing from the eighth grade and half new to the charter school—would begin to experience high school for the first time. At the end of the two days, which included several fun, community-building activities, as well as introductions to the academic expectations of high school, Rory gathered the fifty incoming freshmen and all of the high school teachers in the biggest classroom in the school.

After giving out some awards from some of the team-building activities earlier in the day and making some general announcements, Rory got to the point of the meeting. He spoke:

Let me get real with you for a minute. The last couple days we've had a lot of fun, and that's great. But there's more to high school than playing laser tag with your friends.

In this part of the city, less than half of kids graduate from high school. I want you to imagine the stage at graduation four years from now. All of the chairs are set up. Your family is all in the audience.

We've got some balloons and decorations, and you're wearing your cap and gown. And you're the only one on the stage. Would you be really happy at that moment? You still will have accomplished your goal, but I'll promise you that you won't be as excited as if you were graduating with all of your friends. Look around the room. Let's make this promise to each other: No one graduates alone. We're going to commit ourselves to doing whatever it takes so that four years from now, everyone who is in this room will be on that stage.

And that's not just a commitment for you to make. Look around the room again. In this room are your teachers. They will do anything and everything they can to make sure that we achieve that goal. When you leave the room today, one of the teachers by the door is going to hand you a card like this [shows example]. On it are the personal cell phone numbers of each of your teachers. If you need help with your homework or studying for a test or if you just need to talk through something, you can call any of us, and we will be there for you. The teachers in this room are some of the most amazing people I have ever worked with. One teacher in this room—and I'm not going to name names and embarrass anyone—but one teacher stayed after school every day and sometimes came in on weekends last year to help a student who was behind in math get caught up. Another teacher in this room, when they found out that a student didn't have money for clothes, took that student shopping and spent their own money to make sure that the student had what they needed. That's the kind of people these teachers are, and you are incredibly lucky to be able to spend the next four years with them.

We know that there will be good days and bad days—we'll be there for both good and bad. If you're not getting to school in the morning or if you start falling behind, I'm going to stay on you, and your teachers will stay on you. And I hope your classmates will stay on you, and you will stay on them. . . .

Before this week, I gave your teachers an assignment. I told them this: Make me a lighthouse. [The school and charter network used the symbol of a lighthouse.] I didn't give them any directions and didn't tell them why. Mr. L's is in the back of the room there. [He pointed to a model made of balsa wood.] Miss K's is right here. [He held up a drawing of a lighthouse illuminating kids, turning the picture so that everyone could see. Those kids nearest the lighthouse have schoolbooks in hand, and those farthest away where the beam widens are wearing caps and gowns.] Since ancient times, the lighthouse has been a symbol of hope. When sailors would be out at sea, they could look out and see the beam from the lighthouse and know where the coast was, and the beam could help them avoid danger and get them home safely. Together, we are going to be a lighthouse for each other—to help keep each other on course, to rescue each other if we get too close to the rocks—and in four years,

we will all be together on that stage at graduation, and no one will graduate alone.

In that talk, Rory not only expressed his care for the students but also helped to establish a culture and ethic of care for the school as a whole. A few of the teachers in the room had been at the school teaching middle school grades previously, but some were new. For them, this was enculturation and expectation setting by offering positive examples of “what we do here.” For the students, it established a sense of belonging—being part of a group with a collective commitment—and communicated clearly that the adults in the building cared and would demonstrate care.

While some students transferred out of the school, 100 percent of the students who stayed all four years graduated. All were accepted to at least one college. Two have since returned to the school as teachers.

—Told by a high school curriculum director

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