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CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Caring in Crisis*, by Mark A. Smylie and Joseph F. Murphy.

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# Preface

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In the many years that we have worked in educational leadership and school improvement, we have come to believe that caring lies at the heart of schooling and promoting the learning and development of children. We have also come to believe that caring is an essential quality of school leadership. We are not alone in our thinking. Abundant evidence from research shows the importance of caring and support, along with high expectations and intellectual rigor, to the academic success of students. Educators know how essential it is for students' learning and well-being that they are in strong, trusting, caring relationships with adults and peers in and beyond school.

In 2020, we wrote a book exploring the concept of caring and its application to school leadership. That book, *Caring School Leadership* (Corwin), surveys writing and research from education, related academic fields and disciplines, and the human service professions. It identifies practices that school leaders might use to be caring in their relationships with students, cultivate their schools as caring communities, and foster caring in families and communities beyond the school.

Subsequently, we wrote a companion volume to that book titled *Stories of Caring School Leadership* (2021). In that book, we presented 100 true stories that illustrated concretely many of the practices of caring school leadership discussed in the first book. Those stories focused on the enactment of caring school leadership during what might be called “ordinary time” during the normal rhythms and flows of school life.

The present book of stories is also a companion to *Caring School Leadership*. Like the first book of stories, this book presents true stories that illustrate concretely many of the practices of caring school leadership. However, in the present book, we have assembled stories of caring school leadership during times of crisis. In *Caring School Leadership*, we wrote briefly about the importance of caring in crisis situations. And our first book of stories contained a few accounts that are set in crisis situations. Now, we give full attention to narratives that illustrate how caring school leadership can be practiced in times of crisis.

## Purpose

The purpose of this book is to illuminate, instruct, and inspire. Through these stories, we portray key elements of caring school leadership practice during different crisis situations that schools may face. This book is not a primer on how to lead schools during a crisis, nor is it an inventory of practices that span the multiple functions of crisis leadership. Rather, this book shines a bright light on a crucial through line of crisis leadership—the importance of relationships and the imperative of caring. We introduce aspiring and practicing school leaders to practices that make crisis leadership humane and more caring. We encourage school leaders to reflect on their own practices and to challenge themselves to make caring a central quality of their leadership during crises and when crises subside.

The stories in this book are true. They describe events, actions, and interactions that occurred among real people in real places. Many stories are recounted by practicing and retired school leaders. Teachers, parents, and others also tell of their experiences with school leaders. Some accounts are autobiographical. Some describe caring leadership observed or experienced. We do not intend for the stories in this book to stand for generalizable evidence of the efficacy of caring school leadership, the importance of caring in crisis leadership, or any particular leadership practices. Instead, we see these stories as “existence proofs” of the possible.

## Who Should Read This Book

This book was prepared for several audiences. One audience is aspiring and practicing school leaders. Another audience is those in higher education, professional associations, and other organizations that support the preparation and development of school leaders. We also believe that this book of stories can be useful to teachers and school staff, parents,

community members, and others for developing caring leadership in schools and for defining expectations for their own school leaders.

We developed this book of stories as a resource for individual principals and other school leaders to read and reflect upon. It can be a basis for stimulating discussion about caring within school leader preparation and development programs. It can be helpful as schools prepare for crises and as they respond to and recover from them. We also see the book as a resource for administrative leaders and teachers to consider together to develop strong and effective school leadership and improve schools for students. Several specific ways that this book can be used are presented at the end of this preface.

You will find little of our own analysis and interpretation of the stories herein. We want the stories to speak for themselves. We want you to hear the storytellers' voices, not ours. You are encouraged to reflect upon these narratives and discuss them with others. And you are encouraged to analyze them, give them your own meaning, and apply them to your own situations. We provide a guide to help you engage the stories in these ways.

## Our Starting Point

This book proceeds from our belief in the vital importance of caring in schools and in school leadership and in our belief in the power and legitimacy of stories for the development and promotion of leadership practice. As writers from psychiatrist Robert Coles to organization and management scholar Henry Mintzberg observe<sup>1</sup>, stories can call us to consider what is right and true. Stories play an increasingly important role in programs of educational leadership preparation and development. Teaching cases are widely promoted as an effective means of helping aspiring school leaders understand the nature of their work, examine their own practice, and develop new ways to exercise leadership.

Stories play an important role in practicing school leaders' learning. Oral storytelling is a primary means of on-the-job information sharing and knowledge development. So too are accounts of programs and practices told through the pages of professional magazines. Stories are an important means of vicarious learning for school leaders. Sometimes ignored by academic scholars who favor more systematically developed quantitative evidence to guide practice, such narratives can be powerful sources of new knowledge, understanding, legitimation, and motivation for practicing school leaders.

## The Literature

To introduce the stories in this book, we draw on several bodies of scholarly and professional literature. We look to literature on crisis leadership and management from the fields of business and management, public administration, public health, social and psychological services, and education. Because our focus is on schools and school leadership, we concentrate on aspects of this literature that focus on organizations and organizational leadership.

We also look to scholarly and professional literature on caring and caring leadership. Here too we draw from several disciplines and fields of study including education, philosophy, ethics, sociology, political science, business and management, and organizational studies. We draw from literature of other human service professions that recognize the importance of caring in organizational contexts including health care and social-services administration, nursing and medicine, and the ministry.

Our purpose is not to present an in-depth treatment of this literature. Our focus is on stories and the lived experiences of crises and caring in school leadership. We use general insights from the literature to make the case for caring in crisis leadership and to frame the stories for reading and reflection. We encourage readers who wish to learn more about caring and crisis leadership and management to refer to our bibliography and our book *Caring School Leadership*.

## Elicitation and Selection of Stories

We elicited stories for this book between November 2020 and early January 2021. We reached out to contributors to our book *Stories of Caring School Leadership* to see if they had stories to tell about caring school leadership during times of crisis. We activated our networks of practicing and retired educators. And we contacted current and former

students who are currently working in schools. We sought stories from principals, associate principals, heads of school, department chairs, teachers, superintendents, staff, and others who interact with principals, heads, and other school leaders. We did not elicit stories from students, nor did we engage in systematic sampling. Nevertheless, we ended up with an archive of stories that come from a wide range of schools across many settings.

We were general in what we asked of our storytellers. We wanted them to determine for themselves what situations constituted crises for their schools. However, we wanted them to focus on situations that rose above and beyond problems and challenges that are associated with normal life in schools and to address situations that posed out-of-the-ordinary collective threat, difficulty, risk, or harm. While leaving the door open to any situation our storytellers considered a crisis, we noted different types of crises about which they could write.

Similarly, we wanted to give our storytellers latitude to determine what leadership actions and interactions they considered caring. We provided only a general sense of what we meant by caring school leadership—working for the betterment of others, supporting others and addressing their needs and problems, and promoting their general success and well-being. We gave our storytellers room to write about caring in school leaders' relationships with individuals and groups of students, teachers, and staff; in the school as a community for students, teachers, and staff; and beyond the school in relation to families and neighborhoods.

We told our storytellers that they could write about their own experiences as school leaders. They could share stories about other school leaders. They could write in first or third person, and they could use dialog they remembered. Our only stipulation was that the events they wrote about had to have actually happened. We told our storytellers that they did not have to tell positive stories of caring. They were encouraged to share stories of problematic caring or caring gone wrong. We did not want this book to consist only of feel-good or happy stories. Problematic and negative stories can be instructive too.

From our efforts, we received nearly 100 stories. From this number, we selected 40 stories for this book. These stories illustrate important ways in which caring school leadership is practiced during different crisis situations. They are *not* a comprehensive representation of the untold number of ways that school leaders can be caring during crisis. They are but a sampling and are what our storytellers chose to share with us. We strongly suggest that as you read and reflect upon these stories, you also think beyond them to consider other ways that the central elements of caring can manifest themselves in school leadership during crises.

The stories we selected for this book represent a number of different crisis situations. There are stories about the overwhelming, shared public health crisis—the COVID-19 pandemic. There are also stories of natural disasters; violence and social unrest; hunger, homelessness, and unemployment; mental health crises; sexual abuse; and personal crises that became matters for school communities. We favored accounts of crises that originate outside the school rather than crises of schools' or school districts' own making (e.g., performance failures). Crises of internal origin are important to understand and address, but examining them is beyond the scope of this volume. In addition, we selected narratives from different types of schools and settings. You will read stories from preschools, elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. You will read stories from urban, suburban, small-town, and rural schools and communities. And you will read stories from public, independent, and religious schools.

The stories in this book come from across the country. Not surprisingly, most come from regions in which we live and work. About 40 percent of the stories are from the Midwest, 37 percent are from the South and Southeast, and 23 percent are from the East and West Coasts, the Southwest, and the North and Northeast. They come from 31 different school districts or municipalities from Massachusetts to California, from Minnesota to Louisiana, and many points in between. Approximately 57 percent of stories come from urban settings, 30 percent from suburban settings, and 13 percent from small-town and rural settings.

Our stories are published with the permission of their authors, who are recognized by name in the book's acknowledgments. To protect privacy, we do not associate our storytellers' names or school names with the stories themselves. We also removed or altered information that might serve to identify individuals or places. For the few stories that are adapted from published sources, complete removal of identifying information was not possible. To illustrate the variety of schools and locales from which these stories come, we have noted beneath each story title the role of the storyteller



(e.g., principal, teacher, parent), the locale (e.g., small town, rural, suburban, urban), and grade level of the school (e.g., elementary, middle, high school).

## Student Artwork

Throughout this book you will find pieces of student artwork on caring and crisis. This artwork comes from several sources. A middle school teacher in Nashville, Tennessee, and a high school teacher in Richmond, Virginia, asked students in their classes to produce drawings for our project. Using a simple prompt that we supplied, they asked students to draw a picture to show how it felt to be cared for when they faced a situation that made them feel uncertain, threatened, or afraid. They could refer in their drawings to a specific event or render an image of a general feeling. The teacher from Richmond also gave us access to artwork previously produced in her school's art classes. From the associate head of a secondary school in Potomac, Maryland, we received drawings produced by students as part of projects completed in their art classes. Finally, Mark Smylie invited children and youth in his neighborhood of Oak Park, Illinois, to draw for the project.

We selected 14 of the drawings we received to illustrate students' views of caring in times of crisis. Our contributing artists come from PreK through 12th grade. Their drawings can be considered "graphic stories" of how children and youth perceive caring in crisis. The names of our artists and their grade levels are shown beneath their drawings as are the titles we gave to each. Each drawing is published with parent permission.

## Organization

We organized this book as a companion to our books *Caring School Leadership* and *Stories of Caring School Leadership*. Although each book stands on its own and can be read independently, we wanted to make it easy for our audiences to read across all three volumes. To this end, we assembled this book to align with both of our earlier works.

The first section of the book lays the groundwork for our stories. We begin with an **Introduction** that brings forward our concept of caring school leadership developed and illustrated in the first two books, and we apply this concept to crisis leadership and management. We reintroduce key elements and arenas of caring school leadership practice from the first two books and apply them to school leadership during times of crisis.

Following this Introduction, we provide a short **Guide for Engaging the Stories**. The guide provides an overview of practices that are explored in *Caring School Leadership* and are illustrated by the stories in this book. The guide also provides questions for reflection and discussion. We crafted these questions so that they can be adapted to individual reading and reflection, group discussion, leader preparation and development, and joint administrator–staff work in schools. They are designed to deepen understanding of caring, its key elements, and how caring may function in crisis situations. Also, they are designed to promote reflection upon and application of practices in the stories to readers' own situations. These questions ask readers to compare their own assumptions, biases, and practices with those reflected in the stories. They ask readers to consider context and how stories might play out similarly or differently in their own situations. They ask readers how they might answer the question "What would you do?" if presented with similar crises. Our questions were inspired by authors and teachers.<sup>75</sup> We favored questions that guide readers toward understanding and meaning and that push them toward personal and professional reflection.

The second section of the book presents **The Stories**. The stories focus on two of the three arenas of caring school leadership practice as described in *Caring School Leadership*. These arenas are school leaders' interpersonal relationships with students, teachers, and staff and the context of the school as a community. Stories of practice in the third arena of caring school leadership—families and neighborhoods beyond the school—are beyond the scope of this book. For stories of caring school leadership in families and neighborhoods beyond the school, see *Stories of Caring School Leadership*.

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<sup>75</sup> For example, Donaldson (2006) and Garmston (2019).

The purpose of the stories in this book is to illuminate key aspects of caring leadership in crisis situations and how caring manifests itself therein. Through examples of how caring school leadership is practiced across different crisis situations, we may better understand the importance of caring in crisis leadership, and we can discern important cross-cutting insights and lessons for practice.

Many of the stories in this volume provide direct lessons on the nature and function of caring in school leadership during times of crisis. Some stories lend themselves to differing interpretations. Some you will find inspiring and uplifting. Others you may find troubling and disquieting. You may agree or disagree with the thinking and actions of the school leader. Yet, all these stories can be sources of learning.

Our stories are presented in no particular order. Stories of different crisis situations are mixed together as are stories of caring in the interpersonal and organizational arenas of practice. Mixed together are stories of elementary, middle, and high schools and stories of public, independent, and religious schools.

As mentioned earlier, we make no systematic effort to analyze, interpret, or convey the meaning we might attribute these stories. However, in the third section of the book, we offer a short reflection, or **Coda**, on the importance of caring in school leadership during times of crisis and implications for caring school leadership when crises subside. We also discuss the critical question: “Who cares for the caring school leader?”

## How to Use This Book

There are many ways that you can use this book. You can use it for independent reading and reflection. You can read and think about the stories, beginning with the first one and moving through the book to the last. Or you can flip through, skipping around, reading those stories that are of particular interest to you. You can read this book by yourself, considering a story or two every day as a centering activity, or you can form or join a group of school leaders to read and discuss these accounts together.

This book can be used as a resource for programs that prepare aspiring school leaders for service and as a resource for programs of professional development for practicing school leaders. It can serve as case material for instructors and groups of learners to read, analyze, and apply to their own situations and practice. We strongly recommend working with these stories in group settings.

The stories in this book can serve as a foundation for a variety of learning activities in school leader preparation and development. They can be used as examples of practice to be reflected upon, analyzed, discussed, and compared to learners’ own thinking and practice. These stories can become the basis of role-playing, whereby learners assume the roles of persons in the stories and act out the story line as written or as key facts of the story might be changed. Learners can create and improvise extensions of stories, imagining, acting, and discussing what might come next and why. Moreover, these narratives can be used to help aspiring and practicing school leaders tell their own stories about particular crisis situations. Composing one’s own stories and conveying them to others can help learners organize their thoughts, reflect upon their own assumptions and actions, and raise important issues. Sharing stories can stimulate collaborative analysis and joint problem-solving. There are many other learning activities that might spring from this book of stories.

Last but not least, this book of stories can be used by practicing leaders working in schools with faculty, staff, parents, and students. You can use this book to help inform work to prepare your school community for crises and to lead your school when crises arise. Much of the guidance for crisis prevention and preparation now available to schools focuses on operational matters, on ways to detect potential crises, and on ways to develop particular routines and protocols and train people to use them. Although these aspects of crisis preparation and prevention are important, so too is developing the human relationships, the trust, and the capacity for caring that might help prevent particular types of crises and become invaluable resources for encountering and recovering from crises that do occur. We hope that this book will help schools become the schools before a crisis that they would want to be when a crisis comes.

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For principals and other school leaders who wish to strengthen caring in their districts, schools, and classrooms, this book can become a source of learning for all. These stories provide vivid examples of caring school communities that schools may wish to cultivate. They provide examples for developing caring school leadership among teachers as well as administrators. And, they can help schools collectively develop shared expectations for caring in administrative and teacher leadership alike. We envision these stories being used in teacher professional development workshops, in professional communities, and in schoolwide improvement sessions. We see these stories used to remind administrators and teachers of the aims, virtues, and mindsets

of caring and the importance to students of strong, trusting interpersonal relationships and caring school communities. Indeed, we imagine a principal starting each faculty meeting with a story of caring to focus the work of the school around a core value. We imagine these stories serving as a springboard for administrators and staff to tell their own stories to stimulate expanded and deeper caring.

We hope that you find these stories enjoyable to read, challenging, and reaffirming of the importance of caring in school leadership during crisis situations. We hope that you find them illuminating, instructive, and inspirational for your practice. And, we hope that you will be convinced to continue, even amplify, the caring that emerges when crises come after those crises subside.