

Do We Care for Our Teachers?



To create a caring school community, research tells us that care must be extended to *everyone*.

BY VICKI ZAKRZEWSKI | OCTOBER 23, 2012

I like to think of school as a system with care at its core. And by “care,” I don’t mean the kind of intensive test prep that treats every student like a walking test score and every teacher as a cog in the standards-testing machine. That’s not care.



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I mean care that values the humanity of every individual person.

We know from research that a caring school community benefits students hugely—from greater academic success to more pro-social (kind and helpful) behavior to a stronger feeling of school connectedness (e.g., “I matter to someone at school”).

But a caring school community is not just teachers caring for students. Instead, it’s a place where *every* member—from students to teachers to administrative staff to principals—feels valued as a whole human being, not just for his or her productivity.

Research on care in organizations shows that employees who experience a caring workplace are more engaged in their work and have better relationships with their colleagues. They also have higher job satisfaction and are more likely to stay at their job.

Most importantly, employees who feel cared for have a greater *willingness* and *ability* to care for their clients. Think of this in the context of schools: *Teachers who feel cared for by their administrators are better able to care for their students.*



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So what does a caring workplace look like? Here's the catch: Care is individual to every person, so what feels like care to one person may not to another. For example, in a school, one teacher may feel cared for by having bi-weekly meetings with a mentoring teacher, while another may want recognition for his or her expertise in dealing with challenging students.

Still, there are things that both administrators and teachers can do to create a caring community amongst their colleagues. Here are some research-based tips that, although they may take time, will result in the creation of a better-functioning school.

For administrators:

1) **Get to know the teachers as individuals.** Nel Noddings, the foremost expert on care in schools, says that *effective* care takes into account the actual needs of the person requiring care. We can only know another person's needs by getting to know him or her.



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In order to do that in a school, administrators should show genuine interest in who their teachers are outside the classroom. ^{students} Ask them about their weekends or their favorite foods or movies or how their families are doing. Not only will this convey to teachers that you care about them as individuals, but it will also build trust—a key to creating a positive school culture.

2) Be available to talk. Let teachers know that you are available to discuss problems they may be facing. Research has shown that a supervisor's verbal support of employees is critical to creating a caring workplace.

When teachers do come to you, you won't always be able to solve their problems; that's okay. Instead, you'll help them immeasurably by stepping out of efficient problem-solving mode and slowing down to give your full, respectful attention and express warmth and kindness. Of course, if necessary, they'll also benefit if you can provide them with resources, feedback, or protection whenever possible.

3) Share stories of care. At staff meetings or in informal conversations, tell staff about times you witnessed people caring for each other—for example, a time when the staff came together to support a teacher who was experiencing a personal crisis, or when a veteran teacher voluntarily stepped forward to help a new teacher handle challenging students. Stories like these show teachers that you value care, which will help make care a core part of the school culture.

For teachers:

1) **Do small things for each other that make the job easier.** For example, if it's a cold day, bring hot tea to the teacher who has yard duty. Or when getting more paper for your printer, bring a ream to the teacher next door. When it comes down to it, it's the little daily gestures of care that can mean the most. And care is contagious—small acts of caring can inspire others to follow suit.

2) **Express gratitude to administrators for their caring.** Noddings says that the most important aspect of care is when the person who receives care acknowledges the person who gives the care. This small act of gratitude is what encourages us to continue caring.

It can make a huge difference in our lives as teachers when a child or parent thanks us for our caring concern. The same goes for administrators. While the power imbalance between teachers and principals can sometimes make expressions of gratitude feel uncomfortable, remembering to say “thanks” can subtly encourage principals to continue showing care in the future.

3) **Celebrate successes with colleagues—both big and small.** When you and your colleagues recognize and appreciate your accomplishments—from a strong school-wide performance on a test to a breakthrough with a particularly challenging student—you will be generating positive emotions. Not only are positive emotions contagious, they also build on each other, which leads to more positive emotions—and scientists have found that employees who share positive emotions have a stronger sense of community at work.

Administrators and teachers don't have a single minute to spare in their day; however, building a caring school community doesn't require any special curricula or extra funds or extensive trainings. All it requires is for everyone to see each other as human beings complete with problems, feelings, hopes, dreams—all the good stuff that makes us real people, each of us doing the best we can.

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