

How School Leaders Demonstrate Care for Their School Community in Current Times

School leaders turn to kindness during school re-openings by empathizing, intentionally connecting, and planning for acts of kindness with both teachers and children.

Empathize: Empathy in this case takes the form of listening to—and really acknowledging—another’s pain and suffering, without attempting to “solve” it. This can be a hard stance for school leaders to adopt, as their jobs often cast them in the roles of “doers” and “solvers.”

The psychologist and author Brené Brown recommends the following steps for enacting empathy, in the form of a list of what “I” could do to be empathetic: “First: I take the perspective of another person, meaning I become the listener and the student, not the knower. Second: I stay out of judgment. And third and fourth: I try to understand what emotion they’re articulating and communicate my understanding of that emotion.”

For principals and literacy coaches, Brown’s “empathy steps” could help with staff and family discussions around stress and tribulations likely to arise throughout the school reopening processes. Imagine if a teacher, who confides that he cannot concentrate because he is still mourning the loss of a parent to COVID-19 or is dealing with stress caused by acts of racism in his community, was met by a leader who listened deeply to him and took the time to let a real conversation unfold without judgement. This teacher will likely be motivated to meet his challenges with confidence because he felt appreciated and supported, rather than told how to quickly “fix” everything.

Intentionally connect: You cannot demonstrate empathy to your staff unless you are making intentional efforts to connect with them. That might mean phone call before the school year starts and scheduled

weekly check in’s SOLELY to touch base with them about their social-emotional health. Avoiding the harder conversations with teachers, particularly with those who have suffered the most for various reasons, will have adverse effects. It is no longer the case that we cannot talk about our personal lives at work when the two are so intricately connected and influence one another—now more than ever. For principals, it is rarely true that you leaving someone alone and giving them space will give them the message that you empathize with them and support them. Take the leap and intentionally connect.

Finally, plan for intentional acts of kindness. Here are some other suggestions of how you can show kindness to your staff:

Employ strengths-based and collective leadership approaches: By bringing forth teachers’ strengths, listening to and valuing their feedback, and including them in decision-making, you are modeling kindness. In these cases, your kindness makes the entire school community better.

Show you value basic needs and wellness: When teachers’ basic needs are met, they can thrive. Make sure there is room in teachers’ schedules for bathroom breaks, and make that adult bathroom appealing (and at minimum- clean!). Spruce up common areas for teachers with cozy chairs. Make sure new mothers have a comfortable and private space to pump. Cover recess duty for a teacher who needs an emotional break because of things happening at home. Encourage a teacher to take a walk if they need to. All of these moves will feel more accessible to teachers if you model doing them yourself; explain that you take a walk

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or drive during the school day when you need it, you take time for deep breathing to reset yourself, and you sometimes pop into classrooms just to talk casually with a child and remember the reason you have this job in the first place!

Build a sense of community: Begin every staff meeting with time for personal connections or a celebration of accomplishments, or set up group norms that foster a safe and supportive culture. End every staff meeting with gratitude and on time. Make sure to work these elements into the agenda and don't skip them—making time to build community shows that you are valuing joy, relationships, and reflection.

Show vulnerability: When you demonstrate that you are learning, that you make mistakes, that you had to try and then try again—in short, when you talk openly about your failures and fears—you create an environment of trust in which everyone is willing to be vulnerable. When we are vulnerable, we are prepared to do the work we need to do to constantly grow and change as educators for the benefit of children.

*Brown, Brené. *Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts*. New York: Random House, 2018.