Creating a warm, inviting, and emotionally secure school climate must be a priority of every principal. Ken Williams provides specific strategies to help principals focus the attention of the entire school community on creating such an environment. He rejects the false dichotomy that schools can either emphasize the academic achievement or the emotional well-being of their students. Ken calls for both, and I hope every reader of this book will heed that call.

—Richard DuFour, Author and Consultant

Unless children and adults within the school building feel secure and respected, effective teaching and learning are virtually impossible. Williams provides the proven practices needed to create a caring learning community in which every student and staff member can thrive and succeed.

—Mike Mattos, Author of Pyramid Response to Intervention and PLC at Work™ Associate

“A go-to resource for instruction on building a secure, student-centered learning environment. Williams provides straight-forward steps to create physical and emotional security in schools.”

—Michelle Thigpen, Principal, Beulaville Elementary School, North Carolina

Creating Physical & Emotional Security in Schools provides K-8 principals with practical, research-based methods for developing a safe and supportive school environment—a caring learning community of students, staff members, and other stakeholders. Readers will learn how to:

• Create a positive and welcoming school building
• Develop schoolwide conflict-management strategies for problem solving and conflict resolution
• Establish an effective schoolwide policy for behavior and discipline that focuses on teaching behavioral expectations and using reinforcement and positive rewards
• Address and prevent bullying, including cyberbullying
• Encourage student initiative and resilience and establish high expectations
• Reach out to families and community members
• Plan for a crisis

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Kenneth C. Williams is a former teacher, assistant principal, and principal. He shares his experience and expertise as a recognized trainer, speaker, coach, and consultant in education and leadership. Ken is the chief visionary officer of Unfold the Soul, LLC, a company dedicated to inspiring individuals and teams to perform at the highest level. Ken is a former principal of The Learning Academy at E. J. Swint Elementary in Jonesboro, Georgia, and Damascus Elementary in Damascus, Maryland. His firsthand experience with transforming challenged schools translates into action-oriented presentations that inspire hope, create a clear vision, and offer practical strategies to those overwhelmed by challenges.

His leadership was crucial to creating a successful professional learning community (PLC) at Damascus. The results of his efforts can be seen across all grade levels. Over a two-year period, the school’s state standardized test scores revealed a significant increase in the percentage of students performing at proficient and advanced levels. The process of building a PLC at E. J. Swint continues thanks to Ken’s work in laying the solid foundation in this underserved community.

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Many years ago, when my wife and I purchased our first home, we were excited, overjoyed, and very broke. We quickly discovered that we would have to make many improvements to the house ourselves, including replacing old carpet with wood flooring. As I headed to the local home-improvement store, I envisioned what materials I would need: wood flooring (of course), a hammer, nails, varnish, and glue. Many do-it-yourselfers would scoff at my ignorance, but I was truly surprised to find that glue was not a part of the floor-laying process. I discovered that laying wood flooring involves tongue-and-groove technology: a tongue along the edge of one board fits into a groove along the edge of the other board. When I was done laying my new wood floor, I was amazed at how solid and seamless it was.

In the years since I installed that floor, many wonderful things have happened in my house—we had children and watched them grow and experience life, we learned together, we celebrated. The floor I installed provided a solid foundation for our everyday lives. The work of laying a solid foundation in one's home is not unlike the work a principal does to create a solid foundation within his or her school.

Much of the focus in schools is on what happens between teachers and students in the classroom—and understandably so. What is often taken for granted is the foundation upon which learning takes place. If this foundation is firm, then learning can happen. If it’s not, students and staff members suffer. Principals create this foundation for learning when they ensure physical and emotional safety in their schools in a purposeful and intentional way. These two elements fit together tongue-and-groove to provide a firm foundation. In the past, principals addressed issues of physical and emotional security by checking boxes off a list, but school leaders now face very different times in which creating a safe school environment is a top priority. If principals neglect to do so, the results can be devastating.

Common sense tells us that when students feel unsafe or unwelcomed, they do not want to be in school and they cannot learn to the best of their abilities because the environment prevents success. At the heart of a physically and emotionally safe school is a caring learning community in which
students feel safe, welcomed, cared for, and supported. In such an environment, students are in a much better position to learn and grow, and they have a firm foundation for school success.

What Is a Caring Learning Community?

A caring learning community is easier felt than described; it can feel like magic, though it is actually the result of focused, sustained work. A caring learning community insists on respect for all members. It puts a priority on recognizing and celebrating each individual’s abilities and on fostering meaningful student-to-adult and student-to-student relationships. A caring learning community seeks to embed this level of respect, recognition, and celebration as a routine part of the overall school culture. A caring learning community has high expectations for student behavior. It emphasizes and reinforces positive behavior, and school leaders work with staff to develop a schoolwide discipline plan to spell out expectations and ensure physical and emotional safety for all students. Principals play an important role in shaping and maintaining such an environment; they can be thought of as a lighthouse, consistently providing direction and safe harbor.

School is where many students spend most of their waking hours, and it is critically important that they feel a deep sense of connection, support, and safety there. In a caring learning community, every single student feels welcomed and supported every day. Each student should know that there is an adult who is happy to see that he or she arrives at school each day. But a caring learning community isn’t simply characterized by what leaders and staff do from a social and emotional standpoint. The atmosphere of acceptance, belonging, and support within a caring learning community makes the ground fertile for learning. Mardale Dunsworth and Dawn Billings (2009) contend that, because of their unique position in the school and district structures, school leaders must set and maintain high expectations for themselves, students, teachers, and all others within the school community. According to Dunsworth and Billings (2009), effective school leaders do the following:

- Create a culture of high expectations for student and adult success and support those beliefs schoolwide
- Foster a positive school environment in which students and staff members feel valued, students are challenged to grow academically, and staff members are challenged to grow professionally
- Create a physical environment that is safe, welcoming, and conducive to learning
- Implement an effective system of discipline and behavior management that supports teaching and learning schoolwide

These elements combine to create the foundation of a caring learning community. Although many responsibilities for creating and maintaining such a community should be shared among staff members, certain responsibilities should not be delegated. Because of their unique position in the school and district, principals must take the lead, setting and maintaining high expectations
for themselves, students, teachers, and all others within the school community. Such leadership ensures that the following conditions are established (Dunsworth & Billings, 2009):

- There is an atmosphere of academic press in which learning is prioritized as the most important mission of the school.
- Students feel valued by school administrators and challenged to grow academically.
- Schoolwide positive behavior supports a strong climate for teaching and learning.
- Staff members feel simultaneously valued by school administrators and challenged to grow professionally.
- There is an atmosphere of mutual respect that exists at all levels of the organization and between all stakeholders.

Reculturing Your School

School culture is often slow to change. School leaders naturally place time and energy into the areas they deem to be the most important. As Anne Conzemius and Terry Morganti-Fisher (2012) note, what is given time, energy, and attention will grow. The underlying challenge for educators is identifying the right thing to focus on amidst an endless stream of worthy options. For too many, the trap of business creates a barrier to thoughtful focus resulting in a continuous cycle of work for the sake of getting things done. Leaders must remember that no improvements can fully flourish within a school that does not ensure both physical and emotional security for students. Principals must make sure this critical foundation is set before steering students toward their great potential.

A successful journey does not begin with the first step but rather with a turn to face in the right direction. Likewise, transforming the culture of your school does not start with implementing a sequence of tasks but with creating clarity on the organization’s direction: its fundamental purpose (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2012). Before principals take the first steps to creating a caring learning community, they should take a moment to think about every person in the school building. Are they facing the same direction? Teachers will have different levels of comfort, agreement, and understanding when it comes to any initiative. Some will be on board more than others. Some will need additional support. The key to getting everyone to look in the same direction—whether it’s to focus on emotional security, physical security, or high expectations for student learning—is by first looking at your school’s core values and beliefs. Daniel Goleman (2002) contends that a visionary leader helps people move toward a shared hope or dream, but also allows them to innovate, experiment, and take calculated risks. This has an immensely positive impact on a school’s emotional climate.

Warren Bennis (1997), in his work studying what makes both great groups and great leaders, reminds us that “all great teams—and all great organizations—are built around a shared dream or motivating purpose.” Every single person on staff should have an opportunity to contribute to the clear picture of the school they want to become and help to build a plan of tangible and observable next steps to bring the vision to reality.
Chapter Overviews

*Creating Physical & Emotional Security in Schools* provides strategies principals can use in both small- and big-picture ways to facilitate a secure environment and develop strategies to support teachers through observation, communication, and collaboration.

Chapter 1 defines a caring learning community and puts principals on the right track to developing one, detailing the ways in which educators can nurture supportive relationships with their students, develop student initiative and resilience, establish high expectations, encourage celebration, promote parent involvement, and create a positive and welcoming school building.

Chapter 2 focuses on helping students deal with conflict and anger by examining the roots of these feelings and actions, how to integrate conflict-management strategies into the school building, and how to develop schoolwide conflict-management strategies for problem solving and conflict resolution.

Chapter 3 looks at how to develop an effective schoolwide policy for behavior and discipline that focuses on teaching behavioral expectations and using reinforcement and positive rewards, as well as how the main office can address challenging behavior and how to use data for plan improvement.

Chapter 4 addresses how educators can prevent bullying, including cyberbullying, as well as how to enlist the help of parents and school counselors.

Chapter 5 addresses issues of safety and security, including tips for creating a physically safe environment and planning for a crisis.
Developing a Caring Learning Community

For many students, particularly those at risk of school failure, the caring relationship often must precede their engagement with subject matter.

—Jonatha W. Vare and Kathryn S. Miller

Have you ever walked into a school that feels qualitatively different? A school that is more than just “good”? In these schools, interactions between students, teachers, and other staff members are warm and positive. These buildings seem to hum with productive activity, and evidence of the high value placed on student work and learning is everywhere. In these schools, a critical connection has been made between students’ academic needs and their need to feel emotionally and physically safe, accepted, and valued. These schools are caring learning communities.

A caring learning community is especially important for today’s students, some of whom might not have adult role models outside of school to model a caring ethic. However, it is not uncommon in the current educational environment for school leaders to abandon any concern for the culture of the school. The most important thing has been the intense focus on standards and accountability. Donna Marriott (2001) notes that:

High academic standards, rigorous assessment of student achievement, and teacher preparedness have been cast as the dominant components in current educational reform agendas. (p. 75)

A caring learning community is critical, however, because as Jonatha W. Vare and Kathryn S. Miller (2000) note, a caring relationship is necessary for students to engage in academic learning. Indeed, a culture of caring is the most direct road to sustained academic improvement. This belief is echoed by others. Marriott (2001) goes on to say that high standards, rigorous assessment, and
teacher preparedness “have little chance for long-term success unless they are embedded within a positive and productive school culture” (p. 75). Anthony Muhammad, former principal of Glenn Levey Middle School in Southfield, Michigan—a National School of Excellence—explained that until his school “created a safe, orderly campus that addressed students’ social and emotional needs, it could not address their academic needs” (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2008, p. 122). As Muhammad noted, while an environment of emotional and physical security is necessary for student success, school leaders should not focus solely on social and emotional needs, and when that’s done, then address academic concerns. Many schools have adopted this fragmented approach as an excuse not to address the role of relevant and engaging instruction as a part of a caring learning community.

As a leader, I never felt this connection between academic achievement and a caring community as strongly as when I led a school that had high levels of poverty, low achievement rates, and little sense of community. Improved student achievement was our identified priority, but as I walked down the halls each day, I could see that the school’s social and emotional challenges severely hindered our goal of improving student achievement. It made sense that students would be more likely to achieve if every one of them felt upon entering the building that they were emotionally and physically secure—that someone there was glad to see them, cared that they were there, and expected them to learn. Together, with my staff and other stakeholders, we embarked on the journey of creating such a school culture.

Developing Student Initiative

As many educators know, engaging students can sometimes be a struggle. It may seem as though some students simply don’t care about what it is they are being asked to learn, but, more often, these students do not feel capable of success. Further, they are afraid of failure and of “looking stupid” in front of peers or teachers. In a caring learning community, students feel capable of taking on challenges. They feel supported and valued as team members, and they are not intimidated by failure. Some students do develop this kind of attitude naturally but many do not. School leaders can help these students develop initiative by fostering a community that enables students to feel interested, supported, and capable—emotionally safe. Specifically, principals can establish and communicate high academic and behavioral expectations, help foster resilience, and create an atmosphere in which students are encouraged to take responsible risks.

Establishing High Academic Expectations

Research suggests that when teachers have high expectations for themselves and their students, it has a direct impact on students’ academic achievement (Ross, 1995), and these high expectations are closely tied to caring. Wilson and Corbett (2001, as cited in Muhammad, 2009) describe a study done at five of Philadelphia’s lowest-performing middle schools. In the study, researchers spoke with students to discover the types of teachers they felt they needed and wanted. They found that students wanted teachers who were “strict but fair, nice and respectful, and who took the time to explain their lessons to them clearly and effectively. They wanted teachers who believed in them and taught them in the ways that they learned best” (pp. 22–23).
High expectations should not, however, be used to create an environment of judgment. Rather, the goal should be establishing trust. In his study of 120 world-class concert pianists, sculptors, swimmers, tennis players, mathematicians, and research neurologists, Benjamin Bloom found that, for most of them, their first teachers were extremely warm and accepting. They did not set low standards; they created an atmosphere of trust, not judgment. It was, “I’m going to teach you,” not, “I’m going to judge your talent” (Dweck, 2007).

Neal Cross (2008) suggests that teachers should be explicit about the relationship between effort and achievement. This means that teachers relay to students that people are not just “born smart” but that they are able to “get smart” with effort. Cross explains:

Low-achieving students often attribute school failure to factors beyond their control—a lack of innate intelligence, unfairly difficult assignments, or bad luck. It’s vital that teachers “retrain” them, helping them attribute failure and difficulty to things they can control: studying hard enough and applying the correct learning strategy. Teachers can help students understand that in most classes, students achieve good scores by listening, trying, trying again, reading, asking questions, paying attention, asking for help, being serious, and reading critically. (p. 27)

It is dangerous for educators to set low expectations for students. Clearly this is wrong when it is the result of discrimination that links perceived student ability to such factors as race, gender, socioeconomic standards, and the like. However, sometimes low expectations are the result of positive intentions. Educators who make this mistake are, as a principal once told me, confusing sympathy and empathy. Sympathy allows us to identify with the issues, circumstances, and factors students bring to the learning environment that may interfere with their learning; we feel deeply for students, so we lower our expectations. Empathy also allows us to feel deeply for students’ struggles; however, we are able to contextualize them. We do not lower expectations; rather, a student’s background frames the context for the school’s response.

In a caring learning community, school leaders and teachers acknowledge issues that their students have—personal, behavioral, academic, and so forth—and work with students to maintain high expectations despite challenges. This empathetic stance empowers leaders and teachers to help students overcome challenges.

Principals play a vital role in keeping expectations high for all learners. They must incorporate academic support and feedback into their caring learning community. Leaders cannot simply set or expect high expectations for students and wash their hands of the matter of achievement. Students need assistance along the way; they need to actually see, in both small and large ways, that success is a real, achievable thing.

Establishing High Expectations for Behavior

High expectations should extend to student behavior as well. It is important that students are held to high standards of citizenship, including kindness to and respect for peers and adults. It must also be made clear to students that teachers and other adults in the school hold themselves to the same high standards (Wagner, 1999). These high standards of citizenship begin in the classroom, where
teachers can help students develop self-discipline and take responsibility for their own behavior. The Learning First Alliance (2001) suggests providing students with opportunities for:

 Voice and choice . . . [which] strengthens students’ bonds and commitment to the school community. By helping to define the school’s goals and plan its activities, students see the school as “theirs” and prepare for the demanding role of productive citizenship in our democracy. (p. 10)

While shifting to a culture of high expectations isn’t a task solely for the school principal, this shift typically starts with the school principal. Principals must communicate high expectations and provide support and resources for these expectations. The primary way of establishing high expectations for behavior is through a schoolwide behavior management plan that staff work collaboratively to create that emphasizes and supports positive behaviors and addresses undesirable behaviors with appropriate consequences. (This is explored in more detail in chapter 3.)

**Developing Student Resilience**

Another way leaders can help students develop initiative is by helping them develop resilience. Resilience is the ability to bounce back from setbacks and failures and to pursue goals even in the face of overwhelming odds. The American Psychological Association (1996) has identified factors, many of which can be fostered in a school setting, that promote resilience. These include:

- Positive role models
- Exposure to a greater number of positive rather than negative behaviors
- Development of self-esteem and self-efficacy
- Supportive relationships, including those with teachers and friends
- A sense of hope about the future
- Belief in oneself
- Strong social skills
- Good peer relationships
- A close, trusting bond with a nurturing adult outside the family
- The sense that one is in control of one’s life and can cope with whatever happens

Ask a resilient adult what he or she considered to be of most importance in assisting him or her to overcome adversity in childhood, and invariably the first response will be “someone who believed in me and stood by me.” Julius Segal (1988), who devoted much of his life as a psychologist to exploring what helps at-risk youngsters to survive and thrive, noted:

Researchers have distilled a number of factors that enable children of misfortune to beat the heavy odds against them. One factor turns out to be the presence of a charismatic adult—a person with whom they can identify and
from whom they gather strength. And in a surprising number of cases, that person turns out to be a teacher. (p. 3)

Some students come by resilience naturally, but others do not, and if leaders can help to instill qualities of resilience in students, those students are more likely to feel supported and capable. A caring learning community includes many of the factors that develop resilience and adults that care for each and every student in the school.

**Developing Close Relationships With Adults**

Teachers and administrators cannot simply tell students that they care; they must show students how they care and how to care by cultivating caring relationships with them. Cohen (2001) suggests that the following factors be a part of a supportive school environment. These elements are part of a caring learning community in which students feel emotionally and physically secure:

- Opportunities for students to interact with adults outside of the classroom, such as at school concerts, sporting events, and fundraisers
- Opportunities for students to share concerns and problems with adults who respond in a helpful way
- Access to adults who are willing to provide one-on-one guidance and mentoring on academic issues
- Access to adults who maintain consistent and proactive contact with the home
- Mutual trust and respect between school and home and between adults and students in the school

Sometimes strategies designed to help promote a caring learning community (such as teacher advisories or tutoring programs) are contradicted by messages in the school’s “hidden curriculum” (Educational Research Service, 1997), which is made up of the subtle and often unintended messages of everyday interactions or the environment. Leaders should carefully consider the extent to which elements of the hidden curriculum—including the attitudes and actions of school staff and the physical environment of the school—communicate caring and respect for all school community members. Leaders and school staff should avoid behaviors like sarcasm and favoritism that can undermine students’ dignity or self-esteem (Lickona, 1991). All staff members must realize that what they don’t do or do subconsciously can have a huge impact on students.

Student-adult connections are a very powerful way to create a caring learning community that enables high achievement and allows students to feel emotionally and physically safe; however, it isn’t an easy task. With the rush of daily events and the many demands and competing priorities in schools, it’s easy for a well-intentioned principal and staff to allow these connections to slip through the cracks. Principals must remember that connections are only established in part by
the attitudes of the adults in the school; structures are also necessary to facilitate and develop adult-student relationships.

In one school in which I worked, there was a distinct pattern of failure, which was exacerbated by the fact that students came from very challenging backgrounds and brought some of the remnants of their adversity to school every day. From the outside looking in, our school’s situation seemed overwhelming. In attempting to build connections with students, we did what Mike Mattos and Laurie Robinson (personal communication, June 2010) call “giving data a face.” As a principal, I worked to forge one-on-one relationships between adults and between adults and students, hoping to give our data a face. Eventually, instead of focusing on the cavalcade of problems and issues facing us as a school, staff members focused on the individual students with whom they had built relationships. This individual responsibility would come in a myriad of forms. Sometimes it was a student getting extra help, sometimes it was mentoring, and sometimes it was via a club or an activity. The more adults connected with students, the more invested the adults became in those students. The reverse was true as well; the more students saw that adults were connecting with them in meaningful ways, the more invested they became in their learning and the more emotionally secure they felt, which resulted in improved achievement.

The Ten- and Two-Minute Intervention

The purpose of the activity is to develop and improve relationships between teachers and students. It can also help to increase levels of engagement with an unmotivated student.

Arrange your staff into small teams of teachers who are likely to have daily or semi-regular contact with the same group of students. Teams can take the following steps:

1. Identify a list of ten students with whom they want to establish a connection or relationship. (Note that the number can be changed in accordance with the size of the school; however, no more than ten is recommended.) While all students should feel that connection with at least one teacher at school, the teams can begin with students who have the greatest need for connection.

2. Commit to touching base with two students on the list for ten days using specific requirements for contact (“I noticed . . .” comments such as “I noticed that you always wear an NFL jacket,” “I noticed that you never go anywhere without your computer,” or “I noticed that the people around you are always laughing.”) Make no judgments, just observations. Teachers can ask the student about anything, as long as it meets proper moral and ethical guidelines. They should not initiate discussion about the students’ difficulties, such as poor classroom motivation, behavioral issues, or lack of engagement. This is a time for teachers to get to know students and students to get to know the teacher without any additional expectations. If a student wishes to talk about what the teacher noticed about him or her, the teacher can respond by revealing something about him- or herself, such as “My son likes the Giants, too,” or “I like to paint in my spare time as well.” This lets the student know that the interaction is meaningful, a real conversation as opposed to an interrogation.

3. Reconnect as a team to share specific anecdotal notes about communication with the students. Note progress and share feedback and strategies.

4. After ten days, team members evaluate the progress made with each student and determine whether or not to commit to ten more days with one or both students or to add a new student to the system.

Developing a Caring Learning Community

Fostering Close Relationships With Peers

Educators know that relationships with peers are of paramount importance to students. In fact, many times students are so focused on those connections that there is little room for academic pursuits. It may even seem that the job of teachers and administrators is not to foster these connections, but to remove the distraction of them so that students can more readily focus on what they are being asked to learn. However, the critical importance of these peer relationships in a caring learning community is exactly why educators must focus on doing what they can to set the stage for those relationships to be positive, supportive ones. Supporting positive behavior and reducing problem behavior, such as bullying, greatly contributes to building positive relationships among students and creating an emotionally and physically safe environment in which learning can occur.

In addition, leaders can build a caring learning community by helping students fill their need for a sense of belonging and closeness to others through involvement in extracurricular activities at the school or in the community. Mike Petrilli (2008) notes that activities give students “the confidence to achieve in myriad ways—a taste of achievement they then carry into the world of work” (p. 2). Petrilli also indicates that extracurricular activities correlate with a stronger social self-concept. He notes that extracurricular activities benefit students by allowing them to:

- Set goals and work toward them
- Collaborate
- Speak publicly
- Organize their time effectively
- Design and lead projects and teams
- Listen to the concerns of others
- Compete against others
- Juggle multiple tasks

At the elementary level, schools can offer recreation programs, publications, or performing arts projects, hobby or interest clubs, sports teams, or academic clubs such as speech and debate. Extracurricular activities provide students with a network of peers and adults who enjoy similar interests.

It is important to note that offering such activities can be difficult for some schools. Budget was a concern at one school in which I worked. Because of this, several of our activities started at a very small scale. However, the energy generated from these activities encouraged others to become involved. For example, staff members donated their time and energy to begin a running club, a chess club, and a mentoring group for girls called Sister 2 Sister. In a similar effort, I teamed up with a fifth-grade teacher and the physical education teacher to form a boys mentoring group, Boys to Men. By either modeling directly or providing resources, a school principal can lead the effort in increasing the number of extracurricular clubs and activities available to students.
Encouraging Celebration

Schools can help build a caring community by developing meaningful traditions that reach beyond the classroom and create a positive sense of the school as a whole. Schoolwide activities such as sporting events, ceremonies, and assemblies can instill a sense of connectedness and school pride in students. Meaningful celebration provides the opportunity for high-leverage “culture shaping” in which students receive sincere, authentic, and aligned positive feedback. Leaders often overlook alignment in their celebration when celebration lacks a focus on the big picture. In other words, schools celebrate because it feels good. Leaders fail to align celebration with the overarching improvement goals of the school. According to Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, & Thomas Many (2010), celebration has its greatest positive impact when:

- The purpose of celebration is made clear.
- The celebration is aligned with student learning.
- There is opportunity for many winners.

For example, many elementary schools use schoolwide assemblies as a stage for student performances. Leaders can use these same assemblies to further build a caring community by highlighting evidence of learning and positive growth toward student achievement of desired goals, reinforcing expectations for positive behavior and student achievement.

Promoting Parent Involvement

A caring learning community welcomes the involvement of parents and community members as partners in their students’ education. Many parents and family members today are busy and stressed, some have language barriers, and some are resistant to being involved in their children’s schools because they had negative school experiences themselves (Jeynes, 2010). Fully integrating parents and family members into the caring school community may not be as easy as simply asking them to take part in parent programs or to stay in contact with teachers. So how can a principal best welcome parents and family members and encourage their contributions toward a caring learning community? The following methods (Boyer, 1995; Lickona, 1991; Moles, 1996) are simple, but often underutilized:

- **Help parents understand the school’s programs and policies.** A home-school handbook provides parents with information about the school, including items such as a statement of school goals, discipline policies, procedures regarding grades and absences, parent-involvement policies, and a calendar of major school events throughout the year. A school-parent contract—a voluntary agreement between the home and school that defines goals, expectations, and shared responsibilities of schools and parents—is another approach that clarifies expectations.

- **Establish regular contact between the home and school.** When educators include parents in goal setting along with their children, they extend to parents the responsibilities of members of a caring learning community. Set up conferences with parents early in the school year and reach out to them often in emails and newsletters or on the school website.
Developing a Caring Learning Community

- **Encourage continual contact between parents and family members and teachers and administrators.** This might mean encouraging teachers to share good news through phone calls or emails. Coaches and school counselors can take part in this communication as well. Principals can model the behavior they want to see by taking the time to learn about students’ accomplishments and making personal phone calls as well.

- **Encourage supportive contact between parents and their children.** Principals can educate teachers on strategies that encourage familial communication. For example, teachers might prompt students to write down two things they accomplished in one week and one thing they are still working on and show it to their families. They might also ask students to write down a goal on a postcard at the beginning of a grading period and then mail the card home at the end of the period so that family members and students can discuss progress on that goal. Carol Davis and Alice Yang (2009) recommend a class newsletter—“a weekly or biweekly paper bulletin sent home with students—as a tried-and-true communication channel. One way to enrich this strategy is by including a section with a series of “ask me about” questions that parents can use to quiz their children about what they have been learning. This gets students to review important material, clues parents in on the curriculum, and initiates good parent-child conversations” (p. 64).

- **Involve parents as educators at home.** To accomplish this goal, many teachers meet with parents at the beginning of the year and describe homework expectations, encourage parents to read with their children every day, and talk about the power of television as a positive or negative educational tool. In addition, teachers might send home ideas for family games and other informal learning activities throughout the school year.

- **Develop systems for reporting academic and behavioral progress more frequently.** When schools communicate student progress on a frequent basis, staff can intervene more quickly and effectively on the student’s behalf. These frequent updates serve almost as a tune-up, a time to stop and assess the effectiveness of strategies, communication, and instruction. To involve parents who have limited English skills, translate information that the school sends home and develop enrichment programs or English-language training programs.

### Tips for Parent Contact

Davis and Yang (2009, p. 64) offer tips for administrators and teachers on the art of handling regular contact with parents:

- Make observational notes about students during the week and draw on them later to communicate with parents.
- Start small so you won’t get overwhelmed; contact just a few parents at first.
- Work on finding positive things to say about all students, even those who are the most challenging. Students don’t need to be perfect to earn a compliment from their teacher.
- Keep telling parents you’re open to hearing from them about how to make things better for their children.
In addition to the more traditional strategies, principals can employ the following methods to fully integrate parents and family members into a caring learning community:

- **Treat parents and family members as customers.** Remind teachers and staff that parents and family members are more than simply the people their students go home to—they are customers. William H. Jeynes (2010) notes that parents need to be treated with respect and dignity.

- **Establish and communicate high student expectations to parents and family members.** Both teachers and principals can communicate, through letters, phone calls, home visits, and school events, the high behavioral and academic expectations they set for students. When parents understand these high expectations, they can help support students’ drive toward higher achievement.

- **Establish and communicate high expectations for parents and families.** Just as students will rise to the challenges put forth by high expectations, so will parents and family members. Each community is unique, and school staff can collaborate to discover how parents and family members can best contribute to the school community and then clearly communicate those expectations.

## Creating a Positive and Welcoming School Building

As a principal, I led an urban school in a community with a high level of poverty. Ours was an older school facility that had fallen into disrepair. In addition to the deterioration that naturally occurs in the life cycle of a building, there was significant neglect both inside and outside of the school. Drab, barren, or dirty school facilities are not places in which students can experience emotional security. It is difficult to establish a caring learning community in such an environment. School budgets are rarely flush with cash, so leaders must focus on cost-effective improvements that often require more elbow grease than funds.

- **Make cleanliness—both inside and outside of the building—a priority.** A clean building does not require additional money in the budget, and it sends a clear message to students, staff, and parents that the school is a welcoming environment. Meet with custodial staff to clarify expectations, and offer support and resources to help staff meet those expectations. Our district had no plans to build a new facility for us anytime soon, so we did the best with what we had and made the best of the building we occupied.

- **Maintain the appearance of the school grounds.** Curb appeal—how school grounds look from the outside—can have a significant impact on the connection students and other members of the school community feel to the school. The grounds surrounding our school, and especially in front of the school, were unkempt. There was trash, and weeds grew between cracks in the sidewalk. Bushes were rarely trimmed. Ask for parent or staff volunteers, call on a local church group, or work with students to help with upkeep. Curb appeal is another improvement that doesn’t have to break the budget.
• **Principals should also consider the message people get when they walk through their halls.** Does the focus on high academic expectations and a caring learning environment come through? Consider James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner’s (1999) challenge set forth in their book, *Encouraging the Heart: A Leader’s Guide to Rewarding and Recognizing Others* (1st ed.):

> Walk around your facility and examine the images that are on the walls. Are they images that communicate positive messages or negative ones? . . . Do whatever you can to change the images to positive ones. When images are positive, cultures and organizations are in ascendance. (p. 57)

• **Initiate meetings in which staff members discuss the importance of the messages students and community members see on school walls.** Do they communicate clearly that learning is the fundamental purpose of the school? Do walls showcase colorful and engaging displays of authentic student work? Hallways should be mirrors for students; they should see themselves as they walk through the school. The goal should be for any member of the school community—and especially students—to see promise and possibility within the halls of the building. For many students, school is the safest and most stable institution in their lives. Thus, it is critical for principals to do all they can to create a positive and welcoming physical environment.

## Summary

Students cannot feel emotionally safe and secure in an environment that lacks a strong foundation. The principal plays an important role in creating a strong foundation by building a caring learning environment in which students feel valued and respected. These learning environments are welcoming physical spaces that develop student initiative by creating both high academic and behavioral expectations, that develop resilience in students, help them develop close relationships with adults and peers, encourage celebration, and promote parental involvement.
Creating Physical & Emotional Security in Schools

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Unless children and adults within the school building feel secure and respected, effective teaching and learning are virtually impossible. Williams provides the proven practices needed to create a caring learning community in which every student and staff member can thrive and succeed.
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• Establish an effective schoolwide policy for behavior and discipline that focuses on teaching behavioral expectations and using reinforcement and positive rewards
• Address and prevent bullying, including cyberbullying
• Encourage student initiative and resilience and establish high expectations
• Reach out to families and community members
• Plan for a crisis

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