

WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUES ARE SAYING . . .

Dr. Lionel E. Allen, Jr. is an educational leader who has always walked the walk. His knowledge comes from deep personal experience. He has dedicated his professional career to serving disadvantaged and marginalized students and communities. If you share his passion for that mission, I know you will find his insights both invaluable and inspiring.

—Arne Duncan, Former U.S. Secretary of
Education, Washington, DC

Dr. Allen provides practical strategies for centering students' humanity, perspectives, and lived experiences to create culturally affirming educational spaces. This will require our educators to be courageous enough to show up differently. The strategies highlighted in this book are replicable and can be done tomorrow. This book also serves as a guide for parents, educational advocates, and community members on what they should be demanding from their schools.

—Tiffany S. Brunson, Superintendent, Elementary
School District 159, Matteson, Illinois

Dr. Lionel Allen has provided mentoring and support for our area educational leaders for the past four years. During the darkest days of the pandemic, when our leaders were feeling defeated, Dr. Allen was a bright light that gave them hope and purpose. His passion and fearlessness in speaking the truth about our educational systems have inspired leaders to be innovators and intentional risk takers to ensure that every child experiences the Culture of C.A.R.E.

—Jill Reedy, Regional Superintendent
of Schools, Decatur, Illinois

I have witnessed the administrative mastery of Dr. Lionel Allen in some of the most challenging schools and communities. He has produced excellence in places and spaces that many consider impossible to produce results. Dr. Allen provides a culturally responsive framework and clear, actionable strategies. This book is for educators and leaders who are serious about producing what Dr. Asa Hilliard called “excellence without excuses.”

—Chike Akua, Assistant Professor of Educational Leadership, Clark Atlanta University, Author, *Education for Transformation: The Keys to Releasing the Genius of African American Students*, Atlanta, Georgia

Dr. Lionel Allen’s book is an extraordinary tool for collective change. If teams of teachers and school leaders were to read and discuss Dr. Allen’s book together, it is hard to imagine them emerging from the experience unmoved. It provides a mirror of school practices and mindsets that teachers and leaders will recognize, argue about, and from which they will inevitably learn.

—Steven E. Tozer, Professor Emeritus, University of Illinois Chicago, Oak Park, Illinois

This book is of tremendous value for educators and caretakers alike. With refreshing candor, Dr. Allen’s no-nonsense approach makes a case that educators must care for their students. By confronting tired excuses for not caring, he reminds us of how simple caring can be, and the powerful impacts it has on students’ lives.

—Decoteau J. Irby, Associate Professor, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, Illinois

Lead With C.A.R.E.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

To all those who felt school wasn't for them.

Do not copy, post, or distribute

Lead With C.A.R.E.

Strategies to Build Culturally Competent and Affirming Schools

Lionel E. Allen, Jr.

Foreword by Gholdy Muhammad



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Foreword

As a fifth grader whose family had just left Gary, Indiana for the suburbs of Illinois, I was nervous and scared to start a new school. In my new suburban school, I didn't see a teacher or student who looked like me or anyone who shared my cultural identities. When October came around, the teacher told each student that we had to dress up in costume for Halloween. I immediately felt tension and anxiety. I was a Muslim girl who didn't celebrate or dress up for Halloween. I felt pressure because the teacher told us we *had to* come in costume for the Halloween celebration as a requirement. In my determination to "fit in" and please the teacher, I used my saved money to purchase a costume from the local store. Not knowing how to select, I chose the size meant for a toddler. When I arrived at school, I was horrified when I didn't dress the part of the teacher's expectations and I certainly did not blend in with the other children. The embarrassment and lack of belonging were feelings that stayed with me throughout that school day—and I still remember them today.

This teacher must have seen my Muslim identity as a deficiency to overcome. She implicitly asked me to "check my Muslim" at the door because she only chose to honor and celebrate white, western holidays like Halloween and Christmas. Sadly, my teacher's practices were similar to practices in schools across the United States, where the curriculum, instruction, and leadership did not represent the diversity of the students, did not teach justice or anti-racism, did not offer linguistic or cultural inclusion, and did not teach anything but decontextualized skills. These same problems are still present in contemporary schools.

When I read Dr Allen's book on C.A.R.E., I can't help but think, *"What if my fifth-grade teacher had read this book and taught and led in culturally responsive ways—helping me, as a young Muslim girl, to understand, celebrate, know, and sustain my cultural identities? What if she had affirmed my identities and developed a beautiful loving relationship with me, creating spaces*

for me to empower myself?" Dr. Allen provides a way to disrupt the harms that systems, teachers, and leaders may inflict on children. He uses the richness of his personal and professional experiences to speak to the true purpose and power of schools, which is to disrupt disparities and affirm students' cultural identities and brilliance. In doing so, Dr. Allen reminds educators that we must examine the structures of education historically and in the present so that we can dismantle harmful practices. Through the framework of C.A.R.E., he helps educators to lead with **C**ultural responsiveness in teaching and learning, while **A**ffirming children's identities and building positive **R**elationships with youth. He posits that this leads to spaces of **E**mpowerment. This book provides *the what, the why,* and, importantly, *the how*. The C.A.R.E. framework helps leaders center the genius and joy of youth and teachers, while recognizing the social times we live in and elevating the education of children, especially those who have been historically excluded in schooling and in society. The framework provides a way forward for leaders to lead differently—with care, belonging, and excellence; providing every child with what they deeply deserve.

Dr. Ghody Muhammad

Associate Professor of Curriculum & Instruction
University of Illinois Chicago

Preface

On October 16, 1963, in the speech “The Negro Child—His Self Image,” now known as “A Talk to Teachers,” James Baldwin says, “The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious, one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated.” Baldwin argues that as we become more educated, we question and become critical of what we are and how we have been taught. I argue that the paradox of an educator is that the longer you work in education, the more you begin to examine, question, and refute the policies, practices, and structures that govern the educational system. I am a lifer. I have spent my entire professional existence in schools. I accepted my calling early and never wanted to do anything else. I am fortunate to get paid to do what I love, yet this work has been a tremendous source of disappointment and frustration.

This book is borne out of that frustration. As an educator for almost twenty-five years, I have grown increasingly tired of educational disproportionality, achievement disparities, and our stale attempts to address them. I am angered by the normalization of the failure of certain demographic groups of students and how quickly some educators absolve themselves of any responsibility. I am worried that despite improvements in teacher preparation, standards, and America’s racial reckoning, deficit-minded orientations of historically marginalized children still prevail.

Yet, I am hopeful. This book is for the hopeful and courageous educator. This is for the leader and the teacher who understands that there is no panacea to the challenges we confront in education. They understand that improving schools for historically marginalized children will require the perfect mix of activism, urgency, and a willingness to reject desires for comfort. This book is not about strategy implementation; it is mostly about mindset shifts. Strategies are not enough. This book is for systems disruptors, individuals who understand that deep systemic change will not come from interventions, test prep programs, or new technologies but from educators

willing to ask tough questions, interrogate the efficacy of traditional practices, and empower others to do the same.

There is nothing particularly earth-shattering in this book. Nothing hot, nothing super fresh, but it is very real. The strategies I suggest are simple; they require only commitment and intentionality. I do not pull punches or hide behind eduspeak; I write in ways that appeal to novice educators, veterans, parents, and students.

Critics will accuse me of blaming teachers, invalidating the successes achieved in education, and oversimplifying the challenges. They will say that there is nothing unique or different about what I offer. I say it is time to start pointing fingers, and our quest for something unique and fresh has confined us to a treadmill of ill-conceived reforms and poorly executed policies. Our lack of commitment and unwillingness to change are the root causes of the contaminated school cultures in which many students find themselves.

You will not agree with everything I write, and I am fine with that. I want you to feel angry, uncomfortable, and challenged. Lean fully into the discomfort and know that millions of students in schools nationwide feel uncomfortable. If your discomfort leads to a better experience for them, I have accomplished my mission.

Acknowledgments

The completion of this book would not have happened without the support of my wife and family. Fajr, every aspect of my life has improved because you are in it. Since we first met, you have always been one of my biggest champions. Thank you for believing in me when I did not always believe in myself. I want to thank my boys for the honor of being your Pop. Your futures burn bright with promise, and I cannot wait to see what will come. My heart bursts with joy and pride because of you all. Ma, thank you for being the living embodiment of love and commitment. I shudder at the thought of where Brandon and I would be without you. I am still only now learning the extent of your sacrifices. Where you sent me to school changed my life. I love you. Dad, I miss you and love you. Thank you for breaking the cycle. To my brother, Brandon, words cannot capture my love and appreciation for you. Our bond is unbreakable.

I want to thank Dr. Decoteau Irby for his friendship, mentorship, and support. I am not sure this book would have happened without your unwavering encouragement and push. Thanks also to my colleagues at the University of Illinois at Chicago, particularly the good people in the College of Education and the Urban Education Leadership EdD program. My experiences as a graduate student and now a faculty member have greatly shaped me, and I am grateful for the blessing that UIC has been to me.

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Finally, I must thank ALL the excellent educators with whom I have had the opportunity to share the schoolhouse, teach, coach, and support. Throughout my career, I have benefitted greatly from being in the presence of great teachers and leaders. I have learned a great deal from being in community with you. This book is for you!

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About the Author



A native of the southside of Chicago, **Dr. Lionel E. Allen, Jr.** is a clinical assistant professor of educational policy studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), where he teaches a signature pedagogy course on cycles of inquiry, organizational change, and coleads the full-year residency course for aspiring school leaders. Lionel has over twenty years of experience as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, and chief academic officer. He is an educa-

tion reform consultant, principal coach, and a frequently invited speaker. In 2005, former CPS CEO and United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan selected Lionel to become the first turnaround principal in Illinois. Under his leadership, the Sherman School of Excellence went from the second-worst performing school in the state to become a national model and a catalyst for future school reform efforts. He recently detailed this experience in the book *Fighting the Good Fight: Narratives of the African American Principals* (2022) in a chapter titled “How Should I Feel About That? Renaissance 2010 and School Reform in Chicago.” Lionel is the founder of ed Leaders Matter (eLM), LLC, a consultancy that aims to improve schools by developing school leaders. Under the eLM umbrella, Lionel has provided professional development and coaching to hundreds of school leaders and scores of schools and school districts nationwide. He is also the cofounder and design team member of the Aspire Fellowship, a program designed to diversify the principal pipeline by preparing teacher leaders of color to enter into principal preparation and certification programs. Lionel received his baccalaureate degree from Northwestern University and his master’s and doctoral degrees from University of Illinois at Chicago. Lionel Allen works with educators! Learn more at www.letsleadwithCARE.com

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