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## Why Mindfulness?

### *The School Leader's Life*

“Once a person has consciously embraced his or her leadership role and embarked on an inner journey to stay in touch with the soul’s imperatives, life can and usually does get challenging. . . . Quietude and clarity are both doorways into and destinations of an inner journey. They name what leaders most need: a path that can take us toward our own lives.”

—Parker J. Palmer, Introduction to  
*Leading From Within* (2007)<sup>1</sup>

“Becoming a great leader demands tremendous self-awareness.”

—Jeff Jordan, former president of PayPal (2014)<sup>2</sup>

### **A School Leader Practicing Mindfulness**

Albert is driving to his district offices at 6:20 a.m. As the superintendent of a large public school system in the Southwest, his day routinely starts at 5 a.m., a time when he used to review emails and briefing notes for the 8–10 meetings he participates in every day as a part of his regular professional routine. “To be honest, my mornings used to start like cannon fire, almost with a sense of panic. The alarm

would go off and I'd leap out of bed, already engaged in intense thinking and worry about what was coming in the day. As I prepared coffee and let the dog out, I'd glance through my phone at emails and often I'd start feeling this sense of dread . . . like something bad was coming or bad news was on its way. Often that feeling, a kind of undertow, used to be there churning in me through the whole day. I just assumed this was how professional life was. I used that anxiety. I thought, 'I need this anxiety to be productive, to stay ahead of the game.'"

After Albert was promoted to superintendent, however, he realized that the pace of his professional life was not going to change—there would never be a natural letup. "It wasn't about changing 'what was out there' in my leadership life, it was about altering my own responses to my life." He realized he had achieved some of his goals and created some personal stability, but wondered whether this was the example of extreme busyness and multitasking he wanted to set for his students and staff. "Was I living my life the way I wanted to? Some *honest* feedback from my wife and kids about my irritability and negative moods helped make me ready for some new possibilities, but I also had a sense that I wanted to live my life in a different way. That became stronger."

#### **SOME HONEST FEEDBACK**

"Some *honest* feedback from my wife and kids about my irritability and negative moods helped make me ready for some new possibilities, but I also had a sense that I wanted to live life in a different way. That became stronger."

—*Superintendent in the Southwest*

Are you living your life as you want to right now? Can you relate to these feelings of wanting to "live life in a different way"? What is your dream for your professional life?

About the same time, Albert happened to hear a mindfulness coach speak about the benefits of a regular mindfulness practice at a regional professional development meeting. Though initially wary and skeptical, Albert bought a couple of CDs on mindfulness and began listening to them in his car. Then he bought a workbook of practical, mindfulness-based stress-reduction (MBSR) exercises, which, in very tangible ways, helped him notice his stressors and

how they were affecting the people in his life. He began doing some of the exercises in the workbook; one was a worksheet he used to assign a numerical rating to the kind of stress he felt every day in various situations.<sup>3</sup> Albert realized he was laying the foundation for a mindfulness practice when he noticed himself more able to observe what set him off in work conversations, for instance, and that he could observe this and calm himself down more easily before he got too triggered. This led to a couple of sessions with a mindfulness coach, who helped him put several practices together and gave him a place to talk about his leadership practice.

Now Albert begins his day at 5 a.m. by sitting quietly at the edge of his bed, observing and taking in the silence and peace of his house before his wife and three teenage children have woken. He feels a moment of gratitude for the peace of his home, and he encourages himself to experience his love for the people (and dogs!) sleeping in it, and is grateful for the quiet. Underneath the shades of his bedroom windows he notices that the sun is just starting to rise, which gives him a feeling of pleasant anticipation about the day. Then, as he's learned from the mindfulness podcasts and tapes and his workbook that support his practice, he focuses on his breath. He takes in three deep belly breaths (see Mindfulness Practice Aid 1.2, "Three-Minute Focused Breathing Practice," page 35), paying close attention to the flow of air in and out of his body, starting at his mouth and moving down into his belly. Albert has begun to understand and actually feel that each breath is an anchor that brings him to the present, right there at that moment, and his body has begun to respond to this breathing by relaxing. With practice, he feels his "mind and body working more together." In that moment, as he is waking, Albert says he feels himself "grounding into the day" and sinking into the feeling of "being there, not dreading the day ahead."

Albert then takes a moment to ask himself what he's feeling, and he explores those sensations and feelings with a greater sense of acceptance. (His mindfulness coach has encouraged him to think of difficult emotions as natural, and not to try to avoid them as he has in the past.) He's worried about the upcoming school board meeting that evening, which is bound to be contentious and watched closely on this city's local cable access station. He's also concerned about his daughter's rocky adjustment to sixth grade, and her transition to her new middle school, especially after what she told him last night about "stuff on the bus with a group of girls." She's shy and quiet, and he wonders about the complexity of tween interactions. Albert also observes his new role at home: His wife recently began her own graduate program, so she's

out of the house much more often in the evenings, and Albert now has additional child care and household responsibilities. He also checks in with his anxiety about the district budget meetings that will consume his afternoon. Negotiating between state funding cuts and his district's strong union representatives is part of what he calls his professional world of "riding the rapids of tough choices." He accepts those feelings without deciding whether they're right or wrong, but with a sense of observing them—yes, there they are, he notes; there is worry, there is anxiety. He says to himself, "This is OK," and he feels those feelings in his body, letting out a deep exhale. Using techniques he learned from another mindfulness practice, about "taking in the good,"<sup>4</sup> Albert appreciates all that is comforting and pleasant about the sensations of sitting in the quiet morning peace, and with a final deep, calming breath, and some thoughts about things that help him feel strong (he remembers times he's successfully negotiated a day just like this), he says, "I am capable, I will be alright." Then he gets up and starts making coffee. This routine takes three minutes. (Albert is also using the R.A.I.N. practice for self-inquiry into stress and anxiety, explained at Mindfulness Practice Aid 4.2, "R.A.I.N.," page 123.)

#### NEED A RESET?

Use one of Albert's visualization techniques for resetting mood, like imagining someone you love in a very happy moment or recalling an appreciative comment someone recently made about you. Then watch Louie Schwartzberg's 2011 TED Talk on the beauty of everyday things.<sup>5</sup>

## Benefits of Practice

Why does Albert engage in these practices? "What I notice," says Albert, "is that the morning drive, and the whole day following, feel much more stable after these simple breathing, investigating, savoring, and gratitude practices. I am able to notice the beauty of the day more as I'm driving into the district offices, not thinking about a thousand different things. I see the way the trees look blowing in the wind in the morning, the colors of the sunrise, the garden outside the house where I make this right turn. I often have a sense of promise and pleasant anticipation of the day now. It makes a big difference."

Albert also notices that since he began practicing, he loses his temper much less frequently in meetings, and he feels he is able to

come back to himself more rapidly when things get confusing and contentious in negotiations. “I am more able to take some steps back and think, is there something here we haven’t thought of? Are there other alternatives? I feel more balanced and less thrown off by small things, and sometimes even able to handle more with greater efficiency. I waste less time worrying about things I can’t control.”

Most of all, Albert notices he is more energetic throughout the day, because he feels less rushed. His mindfulness coach has asked him to practice S.T.O.P. (Stop. Take a breath. Observe. Proceed., explained in *Mindfulness Practice Aid 1.1, “Stopping, Pausing, and Observing,”* page 35) twice a day, and often he uses S.T.O.P. more frequently when the day is really busy, like today will be. “This is becoming a habit. I programmed the pauses into my phone [for a complete list of mindfulness apps, see Appendix C, online, page 17], but I now do the practice whenever I need to. I notice that when I pause, my team also is starting to slow up. I feel like we don’t hurtle into decisions so quickly, and we’re able to explore more options. We’re making fewer decisions just out of fear or covering our as\*. This has made a big difference for us as we face a state budget crisis and cuts to our budget everywhere. Really, I do feel the difference, and I’m motivated to keep going with these practices.”

## What Is Mindfulness?

“Mindfulness is awareness, cultivated by paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally.”

—Jon Kabat-Zinn, author of *Mindfulness for Beginners* (2012)<sup>6</sup> and founder of the Stress Reduction Program and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Kabat-Zinn is considered a foundational presence in the rise of the practice of mindfulness around the world.

As you already are aware, we are in the midst of a mindfulness revolution.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes it seems impossible to open a newspaper or read a blog or magazine without finding a reference to new mindfulness practices and the innovative ways in which they are being applied. In the West, practices once considered alternative and associated with Buddhism have captured attention in virtually every sector of our culture, far beyond their initial Western applications in medicine. (We ourselves have several colleagues who are publishing books

on mindful leadership. Whew!) Staying abreast of the mindfulness literature can make one not-mindful.

Training in mindfulness—the *intentional cultivation of moment-by-moment nonjudgmental, focused attention and awareness*—also seems to be everywhere. Managers at General Mills and Luckstone building products are being taught the benefits of the thoughtful pause. Global economic leaders stopped for moments of silence at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in 2013. The U.S. Marine Corps is now studying how to train its troops through meditative practices based on mindfulness, in a course called “M-Fit” at Camp Pendleton, California.<sup>8</sup> Deepak Chopra and Oprah Winfrey offer online meditation programs for beginners at least three times a year. And increasingly these practices are being regarded as essential for leaders and others, for cognitive fitness and focus. Jeffery Bearor, the executive deputy of Marine Corps training and education command at Quantico, Virginia, who supports M-Fit, notes, “Some people might say these are Eastern-based religious practices but this goes way beyond that. This is not tied to any religious practice. This is about mental preparation to better handle stress.”<sup>9</sup>

Like training for an athletic event, you do mindfulness by practicing. With gentle and relatively frequent practice—and a belief that this might be helpful—mindfulness can alter the neural architectures and reaction patterns of our brains and shift the ways in which we regard ourselves, our lives, and the contexts in which we operate as leaders. With practice, mindfulness can allow educational leaders to “disengage from habitual reactions,” as one superintendent said, and become more able to observe oneself in action and to act more effectively in the midst of chaos, overstimulation, and threat, a condition of the lives of many educational leaders. As we explained in the introduction to this chapter, mindfulness practices helped one particular educational leader with a tendency toward anxiety. Albert observed, “I realized that every time that school board member called me I didn’t have to assume that it was a disaster. That’s my choice and that’s my story. I can work with what’s going on in another way. Through the breath practice, and taking a daily couple of pauses to look around me and observe quietly, I am becoming more peaceful and happier as I face the never-ending challenges of my job. I just don’t feel buffeted and blown around by everything the way I used to.” As nearly everyone who writes about mindfulness now points out, the practice of mindfulness is not a religion, and it is not about learning how to clear the mind of all thoughts, nor is it a “relaxation technique.” Mindfulness is not a substitute for appropriate medical

care and treatment (if you are experiencing consistent and extreme negative thoughts and feelings, consult an appropriate mental health professional). Rather, mindfulness practices help us understand and become aware of our habitual reactions, emotional triggers, and narratives—to calm our minds and support our bodies for greater clarity, focus, agility, and personal satisfaction—which, in a truly virtuous circle, makes us more effective and powerful leaders.

### WHAT IS MBSR?

Mindfulness-based stress-reduction, or MBSR, was originally developed in a modest clinic in a spare room of the University of Massachusetts Medical School by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979. From this humble beginning, MBSR has grown into a worldwide movement. Currently, more than 500 MBSR programs are offered in medical centers, hospitals, and clinics around the world. More than 20,000 people have completed the MBSR program at the University of Massachusetts Stress Reduction clinic and other locations. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of businesses have made mindfulness-based training available within their organizations. Mindful Schools, a mindfulness training program for students and teachers, has presented its in-school program to more than 18,000 students in 53 schools since 2007.<sup>10</sup> Mindfulness, in the words of Jon Kabat-Zinn, “has a big future.”<sup>11</sup>

Mindfulness can be practiced both formally and informally, and we will describe both ways of conceiving of these practices in the subsequent chapters. Formal practice usually involves mindful breathing, a body scan, sitting meditation, loving-kindness meditation, and mindful movement. The informal practice of mindfulness involves bringing the many daily activities of life—making the bed, shaving, washing the dishes, walking the dog, making a cup of tea, applying mascara—into a kind of present-centered focus in which we simply observe and experience the qualities of each of these activities.<sup>12</sup> As described in the University of Massachusetts MBSR programs, this sense of being present—*of being here now*—helps us *not believe* all our thoughts (our mind thinks many things that simply aren’t true), and with practice allows us to become a bit like weather reporters of what’s happening in our minds, observing the weather fronts that are blowing in without reacting to them or moving immediately to action or reaction to them. And, in our view, this capacity for meta-reflection—to be aware of one’s own thoughts and to practice regarding them in less judgmental ways (“oh, that’s a terrible

thought; I'm a bad person") or not believing that everything we think is true—is a critical leadership and learning skill. For us, mindfulness practice has offered a way of returning to our center, of finding true self or “the inner teacher,” as our mentor Parker J. Palmer describes it, throughout our own full and frequently overflowing lives. Both of us find, through mindfulness practice, that we are much better able to observe our own ingrained stories, our narratives and habitual thought patterns, and to decide whether they have truth for us at that moment, rather than being ordered around and seized by them. We find this makes life a lot more pleasant and relaxed, and we are able to be more playful and laugh at ourselves, even when we are (simultaneously) late for a meeting, have just said something that landed with a thud, or made a mistake on our budget that just caused our proposal to get rejected, and our spouse is also angry with us. Ever been there?



### ***Practice Pause—Do You Need a Mindfulness Practice?***

“How often do you look at the time, see that it is 6 p.m. and feel very tired from running around all day, [yet] don't really know where the time went or what you did with all that time? How often do you find yourself just doing something, anything, to get it off the 'to do' list rather than finding the optimal choice?”

—Janet Marturano, *Institute for Mindful Leadership* (2013)<sup>13</sup>

## **Why Do Leaders Need a Mindfulness Practice?**

“In 1997, I coined the phrase Continuous Partial Attention to describe what I observed in the world around me, at Microsoft where I was a researcher and later a Vice President, with customers, and at NYU where I was adjunct faculty in a graduate program. We all seemed to be paying partial attention—continuously. NYU students had their screens tiled to display multiple instant messaging windows, email, WORD documents, and more. My colleagues in high technology did their best to give the appearance of paying attention to a conversation, all the while, also attending to caller I.D., Tetris and BrickOut on their cell phones, and other people in range.



“Every stray input was a firefly. And every firefly was examined to determine if it burned more brightly than the one in hand.”

—Researcher Linda Stone, quoted by  
Henry Jenkins (2010)<sup>14</sup>

Cognitively, we have all become catchers of fireflies.<sup>15</sup> Like the beautiful Linda Stone image in the front of this book, the rise of interest in mindfulness throughout the world, we believe, is tied to at least two critical features of contemporary life. First, **the effect of stress and cognitive overload** of our always-on, always-connected lives means we must find new ways to respond to the conditions of our daily lives, as we juggle ever-more-intense leadership environments with all the other things that fill our existences: family commitments, community service, the needs of children and aging parents, exercise, professional learning, play, and relaxation. The second and much more invitational part of our global interest in mindfulness is **our ever-expanding understanding of neuroplasticity, Richard Davidson’s (and others’) term for the brain’s ability to change, develop, and grow throughout the life span**. Since the late 1990s, Richard Davidson, professor of psychology and psychiatry at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as well as founder and chair of the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds, and many other researchers, have demonstrated that to a much greater degree than previously understood, we have capacity to train our minds to respond better and more skillfully to environmental and emotional stimulation, meaning we also have new opportunities and ways to manage our changing—and challenging—emotional and cognitive environments. (That’s what this book is about.)

### **Real Overload: “Everything Is Urgent”**

As we’ve already described, part of this mounting pressure on leaders, as tracked by stress-related health conditions and insurance claims, is biological, and an equal share is cultural. As the pressure to close the achievement gap, transform our outdated organizational infrastructures, and meet accountability goals has mounted in the education sector, for many, educational leadership has become an always-on, round-the-clock, nonstop work ecology, without letup and without organizational structures that give us any time for thinking or resetting. As a recent *Teachers College Record* research study on principal renewal observed, “the principalship is one of the most difficult, complex and challenging jobs in the nation,” and the need for resetting and reflection for most individuals in the role is profound, and unmet.<sup>16</sup>

Given the demands of leadership, many educational leaders we work with say they feel they can't leave the building or the office (which we regard as a critical leadership problem), and several have struggled hard to declare even one day of their weekend email and text-free. One charter school leader we work with described receiving texts from the chairman of her board at 1:30 a.m. (he was a night owl) that woke her up with worrisome requests and concerns, and made it impossible for her to sleep. She also observed that her son's Saturday football games were constantly interrupted by her director of data's phone questions about a state accountability report, and by her dean of students' weekend catch-up. We understood this leader felt she could not ignore these messages, but her weekend was hardly restful or restorative. Institutional underperformance too means more stress. As another executive director of a no-excuses charter school network said to us recently, "Leaders with bad test scores don't get vacations." Yet ironically, we find these stressed and overwhelmed leaders are the ones who would most benefit from mindful pauses and opportunities to reflect on their work. And we also recognize everyone truly is doing the best he or she can.

Always connected and always expected to be responsive, overload and attention fracturing is real, and it comes from everywhere. We were recently visiting schools across the country with a group of talented, highly committed educators on a senior leadership team. We had carefully planned and carved out school visits to focus explicitly on instructional practice and honing the team's discourse around instructional practice. We observed how much these leaders wished to be present for the classroom visits and in discussions with teachers and school leaders, and also how they were simultaneously and constantly pulled away from focus on these conversations because they were scanning their phones for messages and texts about potential other brewing critical matters. In our leadership consulting, we notice how phone and device scanning has become habitual and oddly comfortable (I'm here, but I'm not really here)—as we feel the sense that we're "managing" things by constantly responding (often poorly and incompletely). In our view, this contributes to tremendously diminished leadership focus in our sector, and a lost sense of satisfaction in our work. (We know because we observe this in ourselves as well.)

Globally, of course, this phenomenon of over-connection and over-responsiveness is also real and hardly limited to the education sector. We attended a mindfulness conference recently where a mindfulness trainer asked the audience to guess what time period this set of statistics represented: 2 million Google searches, 6 million Facebook

views, 204 million emails sent, 30 hours of video uploaded.<sup>17</sup> The time period? A global minute. (Those who guessed correctly were awarded a plastic brain, which said, “Be Here Now!”) Much closer to home, we sat with the leader of a high-performing all-girls’ charter school in a coaching meeting in which she explained to us how many emails and texts she receives a day (sometimes up to 300), and the difficulties in getting focused time for work or rest when “everything is urgent, and parents, the Board, or my staff all need answers immediately. Sometimes I work late, late into the night and fall asleep in my clothes—too tired to take them off—simply trying to respond to everyone. It’s no wonder I sometimes lose focus or make mistakes.” We agree.

## Leadership Challenges to Our Sector

Amid this common picture of too-much-ness, and fractured and incomplete attention, which itself is debilitating and can affect mood (the neurobiological effects of stress will be covered more extensively in Chapter 2), in our view the very meaning of being an educational leader is also undergoing significant shift and redefinition.<sup>18</sup> The meaning and purpose of our work as learning leaders is shifting as definitions of learning, and where and how it occurs, evolve. Public confidence in educational leaders and understanding of what they do, and the ways in which our work is measured, have never been more contested and challenging. The introduction of the Common Core, new teacher and leader evaluation accountabilities, much more intense public scrutiny of the value and purpose of public education, and the need to be more and more responsive to our many and varied constituencies while working within bureaucratic structures—as well as a true and dawning sense of the reinvention of the learning sector altogether<sup>19</sup>—mean that we are working in very challenging times in which change is constant. For many of our clients, that may mean “Blorft,” as Tina Fey calls it. “‘Blorft’ is an adjective I just made up,” Fey writes in *Bossypants*, “that means, ‘Completely overwhelmed but proceeding as if everything is fine and reacting to the stress with the torpor of a possum.’”<sup>20</sup> We truly believe, however, that in the midst of these challenges lies the possibility of reinvention and renewal. The strains and seismic shifts we are experiencing sector-wide and as individual leaders may also be opportunities for rethinking and reframing the conditions in which we experience, our work as educational leaders. We believe the practices we outline in this book are central to this reinvention.

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MINDFUL LEADER?**

"The journey of developing the ability to observe oneself in the moment can be viewed as a process of shrinking the amount of time that it takes us to notice what is happening to us and how we respond. By focusing my attention on my ability to observe myself, I will, over time, move from 'As I look back on what happened in that meeting last week, I can now see how my behavior . . .' to realizing upon walking out of a meeting, 'Oh no, I just did it again!' to noticing in the moment, 'Ooh, I just got triggered!' and finally, to thinking, 'Here comes the trigger. I can be at choice with . . . how I respond.' This capacity is central to the disciplines of doing leadership. We must be intentional about developing and strengthening this capacity in ourselves."

—Steve Heller, *Director of the Georgetown University Leadership Coaching Program (2013)*<sup>21</sup>

**Knowing When to Disengage and Recharge**

What does all this mean for us? The leaders we work with are tasked with guiding and inspiring others to accomplish the organization's goals, while simultaneously enforcing policy (often created by others) and encouraging cohesion and collaboration. They must communicate clearly and stirringly, and maintain high levels of efficiency and focus across a huge variety of tasks. All of this responsibility, in the context of a chaotic and challenging educational leadership environment, in our experience means that most leaders do not prioritize time for renewal and recharge for themselves. It is the last thing on the to-do list and, frequently, the thing they don't get to—with important consequences for the work.

We recently consulted with a superintendent who, after some negotiation, decided she would cease emailing anyone on her senior team or within her organization from 9 p.m. on Friday night until 7 p.m. Sunday night. She was reluctant, but she agreed to try. She herself had a first great weekend (sent us text pictures of herself fishing and going to a baseball game—not working!), and was surprised to observe on reflection later that week that her staff lost little productivity by not receiving emails from her during the weekends, and seemed to arrive on Monday morning much more focused and ready to engage with the challenges of the week. We understood the superintendent's sense of urgency, and her reluctance to reconsider this practice. "How do I communicate my sense of urgency?" she asked us. "The work requires

this.” But overvaluing attention to our professional lives and undervaluing rest and time off for our personal lives, and the lives of those we lead, can have debilitating long-term professional consequences. This superintendent had a chronic problem with turnover on her senior staff. With some changes to her management habits, she was able to retain much more of her staff in the following year as the jobs in her organization became more sustainable.

Arianna Huffington, founder of the *Huffington Post* and a vociferous crusader for new definitions of cultural and personal success, made this observation at her 2013 commencement address to Smith College: “If we don’t redefine success, the personal price we pay will get higher and higher. Right now, America’s workplace culture is practically fueled by stress, sleep deprivation, and burnout.” At the *Huffington Post*, for instance, Huffington installed nap rooms. At first, employees were hesitant to use them, but “now they are always booked.”<sup>22</sup> In light of Jerry Murphy’s research on educational leaders, which showed the degree to which leaders felt overwhelmed and stressed (see the Introduction), we know many educational leaders could use a nap room, but we see few organizational cultures where this would be acceptable—yet.

Finally, we frequently find ourselves in coaching situations working with teams or individuals where we are aware that the capacity for reflection on their work—where an initiative stands, what has been successful in a group process, where and what are the true levers of sustainable change within the organization—is underdeveloped and simply not valued by leaders or individuals. Although many of us are charged with leading *learning* organizations, and learning theory describes the importance of reflection for consolidation and scaffolding the next level of insights,<sup>23</sup> culturally in education we tend not to create pauses for thinking and feeling in our learning and leading, or do so only superficially. (One minute of reflection may not be enough.) “By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest,” said Confucius. We believe in experiential learning of course, but we think instituting real reflection time as a cultural practice (during commutes, scheduled into the weekly calendar, on a mindful walk, in every senior leadership team meeting) is critical; we see the bitter results of too much rushing and too much effort flung in too many unfocused directions. Mindful practices begun at the individual leader level have a way of echoing out from the leader, creating opportunities in meetings and in conversations for groups to slow

down, to take a moment to tap the wisdom of the assembled, to move the work to the next level by reinforcing (through thoughtful pausing) what is wise and powerful and helpful. We think this is at the center of growing our effectiveness as a sector.

#### HOW DO WE DETERMINE EFFECTIVENESS?

"We're always being asked how effective is your work, are you getting results and outcomes? I don't object to that. But I'm really convinced that there's a terrible problem when effectiveness is our only standard and we become utterly obsessed with outcomes and results. When that happens, what else happens is that we keep taking on smaller and smaller tasks because those are the only ones we can get results with."

—Parker J. Palmer, *Center for Courage & Renewal* (2014)<sup>24</sup>

How do you manage outcomes and results in the overall context of your work?  
What makes you feel successful and effective?

## How Stress Shapes Our Brains

"Mindfulness is a form of brain hygiene. There was a time when we didn't brush our teeth every day, and I think mindfulness practice is a form of brain brushing. Mindfulness is like practicing good hygiene for the mind."

—Dan Siegel, "On the Importance of Mindfulness" (2009)<sup>25</sup>

In addition to our too intensive, too overwhelming work and professional cultures, we're also more aware than ever that how we think about that stress, and our life's other challenges, shapes our brains. (The neurobiological revolution of the last 25 years is charted more extensively in Chapter 2, page 47.) We are ever more aware of how powerful our minds are at shaping our brains—or in the words of Dan Siegel, "The mind can change the brain." We understand now that our patterns of thought affect the very architecture of our brains, and using magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), we are able to demonstrate that we have much more capacity to shape this neural architecture than we ever dreamed possible.<sup>26</sup> This is one of the reasons we have become so interested in mindfulness as a part of leadership practice—because of its potential to sculpt our brains more adaptively to the leadership challenges we face. As the studies cited in this chapter and throughout our book show, a simple, relatively low-commitment,

eight-week meditation practice can increase capacity around self-awareness, attention, visual processing, and memory, and help make us less reactive.

#### THE BRAIN'S PLASTICITY: A STUDY IN THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MINDFULNESS

In a 2011 study by Hölzel and colleagues, published in *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*,<sup>27</sup> meditation group participants spent an average of 27 minutes each day practicing mindfulness exercises. After only eight weeks, their responses to a mindfulness questionnaire indicated significant improvements compared with pre-participation responses. The analysis of MRI, which focused on areas where meditation-associated differences were seen in earlier studies, found increased gray matter density in the hippocampus, known to be important for learning and memory, and in other cortical structures associated with self-awareness, compassion, and introspection. Participant-reported reductions in stress also were correlated with decreased gray matter density in the amygdala, which is known to play an important role in anxiety and stress. Amishi Jha, a University of Miami neuroscientist who was not a part of this study, concluded, "These results shed light on the mechanisms of action of mindfulness-based training. They demonstrate that the first-person experience of stress can not only be reduced with an eight-week mindfulness training program but that this experiential change corresponds with structural changes in the amygdala, a finding that opens doors to many possibilities for further research."<sup>28</sup> Lead author Britta Hölzel observed, commenting on the findings, "It is fascinating to see the brain's plasticity and that, by practicing meditation, we can play an active role in changing the brain and can increase our well-being and quality of life."

The brain's plasticity has huge implications for us as educational leaders. If our seemingly deep-set, "instinctual" leadership habits and reactions—even those that appear to us to be unchangeable—are open to reshaping and redefinition, then we think it's foolish not to investigate these practices. As the acclaimed neuropsychologist Rick Hanson notes in a new work, *Hardwiring Happiness*, "There's a traditional saying that the mind makes its shape from what it rests upon. Based on what we've learned about . . . neuroplasticity, a modern version would be to say that the brain takes its shape from what the mind rests upon. If you keep resting your mind on self-criticism, worries . . . and stress, then your brain will be shaped into greater reactivity, vulnerability to anxiety, and depressed mood. On the other hand, if you keep resting your mind on good events, then over time your brain will take a different shape, one with strength and resilience hardwired into it."<sup>29</sup>

As one of our clients, the chief academic officer of a large school district, said to us with wonderment after engaging in mindfulness practices for several months, “I used to believe that well-being happened by chance or luck. Now I see that it is possible to claim well-being as my right and responsibility.” What this means for us as individuals and educational leaders is what Dr. Richard Davidson says in a 2013 video for Mindful Schools—“*Happiness and well-being should be considered skills, like learning to play a musical instrument*”<sup>30</sup>—and very short periods of practice, repeated throughout the day, can bring about significant changes to our neural networks and in how we think, feel, and behave. In other words, we are learning how we can hardwire greater leadership effectiveness and a stronger sense of efficacy in our work—and we believe this is central to the visionary leadership required in our sector.

## **Mindfulness for Educational Leaders**

Yet these mindfulness practices, and their implications for leaders, are still much too unknown, especially in the educational leadership field. Some educational leadership programs are beginning to offer mindfulness studies to students in educational leadership programs; see, for instance, Lesley University’s Interdisciplinary Studies in Mindfulness Program,<sup>31</sup> Columbia University’s Teachers College Mindfulness and Education Working Group<sup>32</sup> and new Spirituality Mind Body Institute,<sup>33</sup> the University of Virginia’s new Contemplative Sciences Center’s research-intensive course “Applying Mindfulness Practices to Support School Leadership,”<sup>34</sup> or New York University’s Mindfulness Project.<sup>35</sup> Many undergraduate colleges and universities now offer courses in mindfulness for teachers or as part of their pre-service training. Nevertheless, mindfulness training courses and supports for the new or maturing school leader are only beginning to gain popularity. Indeed, some early reviewers of our book cautioned us that a mindfulness-based leadership discussion might be seen as religious or having an Eastern orientation that would make some skeptical about its applicability in an educational leader’s context. However, hundreds of mindfulness training programs around the globe emphasize the nonreligious nature of these practices and the practicality and appropriateness of these practices for all people, no matter their ethnicity or religious orientation. Mindfulness, in our view, is a thoroughly secular set of practices and way of being and growing ourselves as educational leaders that should be much more widely supported and embraced.



The premise of our book is simple. As a leader, if you could learn to train yourself to respond to the anxiety and stress of daily life in more productive ways, using practices that make you a clearer and more effective leader and also a calmer and more focused person, doesn't it make sense to explore how? We think this is exactly the promise of mindfulness and the mindfulness practices we teach our leadership clients. We want to offer them to you as encouragement in this book, with stories of real school leaders who use them, and to point you to the hundreds of resources that are now available to you if you decide to explore them more through a mindfulness program, an online resource, or a mindfulness coach.

### BE HERE NOW

Mindfulness trainers Bob Stahl and Wendy Millstine note, "When you begin to observe the workings of your mind . . . you may realize that you're generally 'somewhere else' mentally—generally either rehearsing the future or rehashing the past. But consider this: the only moment you ever live in is right now, so why not be here? Mindfulness is never beyond reach; it's as close as your conscious attention. The moment you realize you're not present, you are in fact present."<sup>36</sup>

## Your Leadership Practice Matters

"The practice of mindful leadership gives you tools to measure and manage your life as you're living it. It teaches you to pay attention to the present moment, recognizing your feelings and emotions and keeping them under control, especially when faced with highly stressful situations. When you are mindful, you're aware of your presence and the ways you impact other people. You're able to both observe and participate in each moment, while recognizing the implications of your actions for the longer term. And that prevents you from slipping into a life that pulls you away from your values."

—Bill George, professor of management at Harvard Business School and former CEO of Medtronic<sup>37</sup>

Finally, and perhaps most critical in terms of our views of leadership, we believe employing mindfulness practices helps educational leaders develop the most important attribute of all: the capacity to

connect with others and themselves. As we know, leading other people is extraordinarily challenging. As one of our clients said to us recently, “When I’m sitting in a chair reading a leadership book, everything makes sense, and I can do it all. But once I’m actually up in front of people running a contentious meeting or giving a difficult presentation, I can easily get triggered by my need for approval or control. I get freaked out and start feeling unsafe, and it gets harder for me to make good decisions.” We understand. (Yes, we really do!)

Yet we see effective leaders who are working to develop the capacity to observe themselves and to re-center in the moment, amid the chaos of intense feelings and unanticipated events. The practice of mindfulness helps them grow this capacity. This same leader, quoted above, said, “Some of these mindfulness pauses are helping—helping me to trust myself more. I’ve noticed people see me as more trustworthy—they actually say that.” We know from the work of Wayne Hoy and associates, who developed a metric for evaluating school mindfulness,<sup>38</sup> that trust and mindfulness are inextricably linked, and highly effective schools score high on measures of trust.<sup>39</sup> Trust is linked to student achievement, a sense of leadership coherence, and moral authority, and as described by Hoy and others, organizational mindfulness is a part of creating trust and school mindfulness. “Mindful school climates,” says Hoy, lead to a willingness to investigate mistakes, work realistically with organizational weaknesses, and allow for occasional creative reinvention.<sup>40</sup> Due to their capacity to regulate their own moods and manage relationships with others, mindful leaders can ask others more directly for what’s needed, describe why this is important to the organization and the individual, and coalesce positive emotions and intentions around workplace goals. The practice of mindfulness, we believe, supports the development of emotional poise and resilience at several levels, and we see this experientially in our coaching practices and in our own lives.

## **A Leader With a Growing Mindfulness Practice**

We work with Natalia, a principal and instructional leader who is unusually skillful at emotional self-regulation and is highly interpersonally self-aware. She knows herself well and is unafraid of describing her faults, and she also holds herself and others to high standards, while managing to be funny, warm, and unassuming. We sometimes watch with wonder as Natalia breaks tension in her staff or between two teachers with a gently funny or self-deprecating remark, and observe how

Natalia is able to connect authentically with those around her because she seems unafraid of being herself. Because of these qualities (and others), Natalia has immense staff loyalty and staff coherence, is able to see problems and crises brewing in the organization long before they become chronic, and has many ways of addressing such problems—like asking her staff members what they think she should do. We also observe that Natalia and her team are creative and risk-taking in their capacity to generate solutions to common problems, especially around lack of time or resources. Natalia and her team tend to be straightforward about what they don't know, frequently describing their lack of knowledge and their need for help from others. When we query Natalia on her stability, high levels of trust, and leadership coherence, Natalia says “self-renewal” is at the center of her leadership vision. She is also a daily yoga practitioner, which she considers central to her work as a manager and leader.

Natalia credits her skill as a leader to the daily “checking in on the mat” and her awareness of emotions as they come up in her body. “I can tell when I’m getting triggered and lost, and I have all these pausing and self-compassion practices I now use, with myself and others. I know this helps me not get sucked into events quite as rapidly as I did in the past.” All this makes sense, since we know that self-awareness and creating a sense of “enoughness” is critical to effective leadership and creating a coherent leadership culture, and that magical as this sounds, we all need practical ways of doing this. As we describe in Chapter 3, pages 91–92, we think of somatic awareness, and practices like yoga, aikido, and other forms of mindful movement, as contemplative practices that foster this kind of self-renewal and capacity to be emotionally perceptive of oneself and others, as part of building mindful leadership and gaining access to the wisdom of the entire body.

We know mood matters. As Wharton researchers Shimul Melwani and Sigal Barsade recently found,<sup>41</sup> the emotional climate and mood of a leader have dramatic effects on his or her team. Sour moods have “ripple effects,” affecting everyone on the team, both explicitly and subtly, and even relatively subtle emotional cues like “a sarcastic eye roll can have a long-lasting impact on an executive’s authority. It can also rock her entire team.”<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, having a broad repertoire of emotional intelligence skills and expressing positive emotions tend to enhance the performance of the individual, the group, and the entire organization—sometimes in subtle ways that are difficult to detect. Natalia’s warmth, sense of humor, and humility are a part of her skill set, but so too are her sense of being grounded and her ability to be sensitive to others without being rocked by the reactions of others. The educational leaders we work with who value and place a high

priority on their own emotional stability, coherence, and emotional presence, supported by mindfulness—like Natalia—are also not surprisingly the highest performers and most innovative leaders.

## First Steps: You've Got to Practice

“One of the primary ways you teach mindfulness . . . is just through your presence.”

—Megan Cowan, co-founder and program director, Mindful Schools

If you were calmer, more focused, and less driven by a sense that there is never enough time in the day, would your demeanor have positive effects on your staff and school climate? Would this approach help support a trusting, cohesive school culture and, ultimately, higher student achievement and student efficacy? The purpose of these practices for a school leader is, of course, not only to develop greater clarity, personal poise, and sense of enhanced well-being, but also to become a more skillful leader. So think about Albert, the superintendent presented at the beginning of this chapter. With his growing mindfulness practice, he is better able to “pull his mind and his emotions back to a place where he wants them to be.” He is less reactive and more efficient, because he spends less time ruminating about interpersonal reactions and challenges to his ego and ideas. Albert observes that he is more aware of where his thoughts go, and with mindfulness training, he has learned this subtle but important set of skills for getting himself focused on what he thinks is important.

### PRACTICE TIP

How mindful are you? Take this quiz: [http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/quizzes/take\\_quiz/4](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/quizzes/take_quiz/4).

For something more extensive, you may also want to visit the self-scored Mindful Attention Awareness Scale developed by Kirk Warren Brown, PhD, at [www.mindfulness-extended.nl/content3/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/MAAS-EN.pdf](http://www.mindfulness-extended.nl/content3/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/MAAS-EN.pdf) and in Appendix G, online, page 41.

What does it take to become an authentic leader? “You must have practices that you engage in every day.”

—His Holiness the Dalai Lama (2012)

Yet unlike so many professional development or leadership trainings we've attended, we cannot buy mindfulness training for our schools or districts, hold a few trainings about it, monitor progress, and assume it is working. Mindfulness cannot be "implemented" in a school culture (or in an individual leader) in a conventional sense, because implementation implies that the result is known and anticipatable. Mindfulness in our leadership practice is rather a commitment to practice, to daily "attentive repetition," with an understanding that for many of us, the benefits of a daily mindfulness commitment are subtle and require a noticing of slight shifts in ourselves and our reactions. As Bill George, professor of management at the Harvard Business School and former CEO of Medtronic, observes about his own meditation and mindfulness practice, it is necessary to commit daily. "I don't use the word 'practice' lightly," George wrote in a highly personal blog post. "In order to gain awareness and clarity about the present moment, you must be able to quiet your mind. That is tremendously difficult and takes a lifetime of practice. In 2012, I had the privilege of presenting my ideas on authentic leadership to his Holiness the Dalai Lama. When I asked him what it took to become an authentic leader, he replied, 'You must have practices that you engage in every day.'"<sup>43</sup>

More than almost any other directive we bring with our book, we believe that educational leaders *must engage with these mindfulness practices themselves to legitimately bring mindfulness initiatives to their schools*. This requires us to commit to the practices ourselves to successfully embody them, as the opening anecdote about Albert indicates. We will take you through formal and informal practice throughout the book, and we urge you to have confidence in yourself as you initiate your journey. We're here with you.

See Mindfulness Practice Aid 1.1, "Stopping, Pausing, and Observing." We urge you to begin—*right now*.

## Mindfulness Practice Aids

### Mindfulness Practice Aid 1.1: Stopping, Pausing, and Observing

This practice and the breathing practice also in this section are perhaps the most essential building blocks of any mindfulness practice and are so common you can download apps for them into your smartphone (see Appendix C, online, page 17) to tell you when, throughout the day, to practice them.

We learned the pause practice from our MBSR training and thank our teachers Bob Stahl and Wendy Millstine for this particular version of it.<sup>44</sup> There are hundreds of versions and instructions for this practice, from versions designed for children (see, for instance, *Planting Seeds: Practicing Mindfulness With Children* by Thich Nhat Hanh—all books are included in Appendix A, online, page 1) to Jon Kabat-Zinn’s lovely instructions in *Mindfulness for Beginners*. Here is ours, from MBSR and the helpful, pragmatic book, *Calming the Rush of Panic* by Bob Stahl and Wendy Millstine.

Because mindfulness is about helping us recognize what’s happening in the present moment, to do this practice, you put on hold whatever you’re doing for a moment to realize what’s going on with you. This pausing practice helps restore your balance, like hitting the reset button on your computer, so you can proceed refreshed and renewed. It’s like a little mini-check-in with yourself and your body and the world you are in at the moment.

The acronym S.T.O.P., described by Stahl and Millstine, helps you remember the following steps:

- Stop.
- Take a breath.
- Observe, acknowledge, and allow what’s here.
- Proceed and be present.

Many of us, including the authors, have been surprised when we set our phones for an hourly S.T.O.P. practice to discover that we’re sitting in an uncomfortable position, we need to go to the bathroom (we didn’t even know), we’re hungry, or our backs need a stretch. Because we’ve become acculturated to long meetings or long periods working at the computer, we’ve actually developed a talent for “checking out” of our bodies so that we can do what we think we’re supposed to do and get through our ever-blooming to-do list.

With this S.T.O.P. practice, we recommend that you plan to do this at least twice a day during your workday, and actually set a time of day for it. Remember, like all mindfulness practices, the more you practice it, the more rewarding it becomes (you’re rewiring your brain to know how to pause). We observe that the habitual S.T.O.P. practice can help us experience more groundedness in the day—so we can remember what it feels like to be us—and it is especially helpful when we feel moments of anger, panic, or the push of a deadline. For us, pausing can help us feel more expansive and relaxed, and we think this makes us better thinkers and partners in all kinds of work.

Give it a try, and let us know how it feels! We want to hear from you.

## **Mindfulness Practice Aid 1.2: Three-Minute Focused Breathing Practice**

In addition to the S.T.O.P. practice, here is a breath practice to help you begin to alleviate stress, bring greater awareness to how you are breathing, and restore calm. If you wish, you can use one of the mindfulness timers listed in Appendix C, online, page 17, when trying out these practices.

- Sit in a quiet place, with the spine comfortably straight but not rigid, and in a posture that feels dignified.
- Allow your eyes to be open or closed—notice what feels most comfortable.
- Notice how you are sitting without judging yourself
- Feel your feet on the floor.
- Feel your legs, hips, torso, arms, chest, and face.
- Bring your attention to the physical sensation of breathing with a sense of curiosity and openness.
- Locate where you feel the breath in the body.
- Feel the breath come in and go out, accepting things as they are for the moment.
- Observe and feel the in-breath without judgment.
- Follow the breath as it comes into the body.
- Notice the slight pause between the in- and the out-breaths.
- Follow and feel the out-breath, noticing that the out-breath turns into the in-breath.
- Be with the sensations of breathing.
- When you notice that the mind has wandered away from its attention on the breath, gently yet firmly bring the wandering mind back to the direct bodily sensation of breathing.
- Avoid making yourself into a failure or giving yourself grief; pivot your feelings and instead generate a feeling of being OK and accepting yourself as you are.
- Each time the mind wanders, again, gently and firmly bring the mind back to the sensation of the breath, noticing the in-breath and the out-breath, from the very first sensation of the breath coming into the body to the very last sensation of the breath leaving the body.
- After three minutes of practice like this, stretch gently and open your eyes if they are closed.
- Please try this or the other practices listed here daily and notice how you feel.

### MINDFUL LEADER PRACTICE CONNECTION

For a beautiful and moving one-hour portrait of Mindful Schools' work in a challenging middle school classroom in San Francisco, please see the 2013 documentary *Room to Breathe*.<sup>45</sup> (The work of Mindful Schools is described in various places in this book.) We think this contains some of the most compelling anecdotal evidence of how mindfulness can be helpful to students, teachers, and schools that we've seen. We hope you'll watch it.

"People who are teaching these methods need to be grounded in a practice."

—Dr. Richard Davidson, "Healthy Habits of Mind" (2013)<sup>46</sup>

## Portraits of Practice

In every chapter of this book we offer you interviews with practicing K–12 or college leaders who are engaged in mindfulness practices. We thank them for agreeing to appear in our book, and hope you can learn from them about their journey of mindful leadership.

### 1.1: Tanishia Williams Minor, Executive Director

School and Special Education Support Services, District 79,  
New York City

"When I think of how mindfulness has changed my life, it really boils down to helping me to be my best self, caring for myself spiritually, emotionally, mentally and physically."

Tanishia Williams Minor is a person of boundless energy, and like many heads of educational organizations, she has a nearly nonstop schedule. Finally catching up to her for a phone conversation was well worth it. She begins by describing her work environment.

Tanishia has the challenging responsibility of directing New York City's District 79 special education services. District 79 includes more than 300 alternative schools and programs throughout New York City. The district serves 65,000 over-age, under-credited students whose schooling has been interrupted. The school's population includes adjudicated youth, students with substance abuse issues, a school for adults, and one of New York City's largest high school



equivalency testing programs. As she describes the school's population, we sense a deep connection not just to the work, but also to the students she serves.

"District 79 is a school unlike the traditional notion," she says. "Instead, it is a school without walls. One could find one-teacher sites in a recreation room in a public housing facility or a substance abuse treatment program at an agency, or a school-based program at our site on Rikers Island, one of New York City's largest jails. While our population is transient, this movement through the system is exacerbated by the fact that most of our students are in some form of distress. They are in varying stages of distress: Some are teen parents, others are pursuing vocational education services, still others are studying for their high school equivalency diploma, and another group of students is working full time."



We can sense that Tanishia feels a true calling and love for her work, and a real dedication to the students she serves. She describes this dedication as one of the primary reasons she turned toward mindfulness. "When working as a high school principal, I had a very stressful job that was made even more stressful because I really owned the academic success of the 300 students in my school. I wore that ownership like a coat. Actually, I wore it like a second layer of skin.

"Physically, I was tired a lot. I had cramps; I was sluggish. I was living a really fast-paced life: I would leave my house at about 6:30 a.m. and return home around 9:00 p.m. every day. I knew how to cook, but I made a lot of poor food choices, choosing convenience over nutrition. I was young and took my body's ability to process this food for granted. I didn't value the link between the food I ate and my cognitive ability.

"I ate on the go—high calorie, low nutrient—all of the big fast-food chains—quick and easy. I could nibble on a little something and keep thinking about work. I didn't want to lose time trying to find something better. In addition, in many instances, I found solace in the food.

"I started very slowly to change. I realized that I had to take better care of my body to help the students. I completely changed my diet. I started to slow down. I examined why I ate and not just what I ate. I reflected on how I ate. I realized that food started to become synonymous with taking a cognitive break from the stressors at work. And I exploited those tiny breaks as often as I could.

"From examining my eating habits, I started looking at the condition of my physical body. I could keep up with the students—that

wasn't a problem. It was my mental stamina and strength—that just wasn't there." Tanishia's voice trails off as she reflects back to this moment. "I could not sustain energy. I realized that I can be a more effective leader and help my kids in school if I take better care of myself.

"I started reading lots of books on mindfulness and meditation. I even attended a mindfulness retreat digitally. I listened to talks on my computer. I learned the importance of being still. This was a revelation. I shifted from thinking, 'What needs to be done next?' to 'How can I do this more efficiently? How can we do this better?' I became aware of my thinking and slowly began to get myself off the endless wheel of looking for what was next. I began to appreciate the small successes in the now. I began to accept that what I had done was enough for that moment." Even in this phone conversation, we can sense that these words resonate deeply within her.

We can hear in her voice a blend of strength, vulnerability, and courage. She says, "Today, I begin each day by sitting quietly for a few minutes, just breathing and noticing how I'm feeling. I practice yoga, and I have adopted a Paleo Diet, which consists mainly of fish, grass-fed pasture-raised meats, eggs, vegetables, fruit, fungi, roots, and nuts, and excludes grains, legumes, dairy products, potatoes, refined salt, refined sugar, and processed oils. I am reminded of my mother's words: 'Eat foods for what they do for your body.'

"'Be your best you' is what I constantly tell myself. When I think of how mindfulness has changed my life, it really boils down to helping me to be my best self, to caring for myself spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically."

*Tanishia Williams Minor currently serves as the executive director of school and special education support services in District 79 for the New York City Public Schools System Department of Education. She leads the district's efforts to ensure that its teachers, school leaders, and district office staff members are the most effective in the nation. Prior to this appointment, Tanishia served as principal within the District of Columbia Public School System. During her time there, she served as the founding principal of The Washington Metropolitan High School, a premiere alternative school for students who have been disconnected or disengaged throughout their educational tenure.*

## **1.2: Leslie J. Dangerfield, PhD, Assistant Principal**

St. Lucie County Public Schools, Florida

"Around here, mindfulness is very outside the box. But we think it's worth doing. And for me, personally, it's been very rewarding."

We recently spoke with Leslie J. Dangerfield, assistant principal of an elementary school in St. Lucie County, Florida, about her emerging mindfulness practice, developed in response to the needs of her school population. Not a longtime practitioner, but a beginner, Dr. Dangerfield's initiation to mindful leadership practice is suggestive about how to begin, how to fit mindfulness practices into a very busy life, and why it's beneficial to a school leader, even if it means getting up a few minutes earlier every morning to do it.



As an assistant principal at a school in southern coastal Florida that serves a population of children who are often struggling with English as a second language, or not living with a biological parent, and are economically challenged—more than 90% receive free or reduced lunches—mindfulness practice for third to fifth graders was not an easy sell to her parent population. “In this neighborhood, mindfulness is completely outside the box. But as a leader, you do anything you can to help your children,” Leslie said, as she described how she got started in a mindfulness practice for her students, and inadvertently for herself.

When a guidance counselor at the school first suggested mindfulness practices for staff overwhelmed with the daily stresses of work, Leslie was intrigued. A weekly MBSR (mindfulness-based stress-reduction) training program soon began for interested staff—at no cost. Unfortunately, however, the school's MBSR training program occurred right after school—a time when Leslie wasn't able to participate due to her administrative duties. She did, however, practice on her own, using the resources provided to staff participating in the school's MBSR program. “I started taking the CDs of the meditations home with me at night and listening to them. I began to notice a real difference when I began using them regularly. Starting independently with the guided meditations at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) Mindful Awareness Research Center with Megan Cowan,<sup>47</sup> Leslie also watched the videos of “introduction to mindful awareness” by Diana Winston on the UCLA site.<sup>48</sup> “I had to find the teacher/leader meditation voice that was right for me, and the practices that worked for me. Being a very busy school administrator, with a 24-hour job and three kids, I also had to find a time of day that I could do this.”

Most mornings, very early in the morning, Leslie now gets up and meditates before school. “I try to do this every morning, a minimum of two to three times a week for about 10 or 15 minutes. When I first started, I needed all the guidance and the talking, and then more and more I wanted less talking, and more quiet. At first, the full body scan [see Mindfulness Practice Aid 2.3, “The Body Scan: Mindful Awareness of the Body,” page 62] was too much for me, and then I started focusing on parts of the body myself, on my own.”

What are the big benefits Leslie notices in herself? “I find myself enjoying the peace, and seeking more of it. I find that it’s easier for me to focus on what’s important, and to let things go that used to bother me . . . you know, laundry, carpooling kids, cooking. It’s reduced my headaches and made me more peaceful.”

Feeling the personal benefits, she sought additional information to improve her practice. After watching the *Room to Breathe* video from Mindful Schools, she decided to try to expand mindfulness training further at her own school. She wrote a grant to the local school board, which approved it, Leslie says, because its benefits were tied directly to students. She received the grant and was on her way, slowly seeing results with her school’s students in the pilot program. “Some kids don’t get it, and some do. But really, the message is that you’d do anything to help your kids, and this is important work for us.

“I’m a learner,” says Leslie. “Around here, mindfulness is very outside the box. But we think it’s worth doing. And for me, personally, it’s been very rewarding.”

*Leslie Dangerfield, PhD, is a school administrator with over twenty years of experience in public schools. She resides in Florida with her husband and three children.*

### **1.3: Ben Marcune, Chemistry Teacher**

Alexander Hamilton Preparatory Academy, Elizabeth, New Jersey

“Mindfulness is like a buffer zone between the situation and my response. It gives me a moment to reflect, to notice the gut sense in my body. I come back to my breath, to myself. I check in with myself; then, I know what to do.”

Ben Marcune has been a longtime friend, and as we were thinking of people who truly embody mindfulness—the capacity to stay present and focused, with a quiet calm, a true quality of acceptance of whatever shows up in life—we just knew that he should be a part of this book.

We spoke to Ben on a rainy Sunday afternoon. He had just completed five hours of work preparing for the week ahead: reviewing lesson plans, grading papers, making up for the time he spent the day before at an all-day mindfulness retreat offered by a local group in Philadelphia.

Ben begins by talking about his school and the students. He is a chemistry teacher at Alexander Hamilton Preparatory Academy in Elizabeth, New Jersey, a working-class immigrant community. His students are 85% Hispanic, 10% African American, and 5% other designations. We can almost feel the softness in his voice as he describes “his kids,” the students. “They come to me with no math or science skills. They struggle with arithmetic, problem solving, reading, and writing. I have to work on very basic skills just to get them to the point to learn science.



“I’m a new teacher. This is a midlife career change. I spent 17 years as a chemist at Merck, and was laid off. By chance, I ran into a friend who suggested that I might want to apply my science skills in the classroom, teaching kids. I had volunteered a few summers earlier, teaching music for students in my daughter’s middle school class, and had a ball. I just knew that teaching was right for me.

“I started practicing meditation with Chan Master Sheng Yen in Corona, Queens, New York, and when I moved to New Jersey, I looked for a place to continue practicing. Meditation gave me so much inner peace of mind in what was a really crazy lifestyle. Music, too, has been a huge part of my life. I have always loved playing guitar, writing music, and improvising with other musicians. Being a musical artist requires a high degree of sensitivity, and being very present. Mindfulness has only heightened my ability as a musician.

“I started practicing mindfulness in 1997 when I met a local group, and I guess you can sense that I am an intuitive person, so again, I just knew this [teaching] was right for me. At the time, I was working at Merck and my life was filled with tremendous stress and pressure, and a lot of fear of layoffs.” Ben’s voice trails off a bit, recalling the mental and physical toll of his work.

“Mindfulness is huge in helping me realize that everything I do and say can have a profound impact on my kids. Because of mindfulness, I am very aware of my response to my students. I’ve trained myself to notice my state of mind in any moment, and to minimize

negative habits and responses. Mindfulness is like a buffer zone between the situation and my response. It gives me a moment to reflect, to notice the gut sense in my body. I come back to my breath, to myself. I check in with myself; then, I know what to do.”

The years of practice and study of mindfulness shine through these words, like a ray of light through cracks in old floorboards, and we sense that this isn’t just an idea, a notion for Ben, but, instead, is a way of life.

“About half my job as a teacher is teaching chemistry. The other half is doing my best to motivate and inspire my kids. My work isn’t just a paycheck. I give my all to these kids. And, yes, some days, I am totally drained, and yet, it’s worth it. I know I have touched them. More importantly, mindfulness has helped me appreciate each student. To be mindful is to be mindful of each person, to really see each person. I have a lot of compassion for these students, for their lives.”

*Formerly a research chemist for Merck & Co., Ben Marcune now teaches high school chemistry at an inner city high school in Elizabeth, New Jersey. He is also a schooled musician who loves to write, record, and perform his original material. Ben has had a Zen Buddhist practice for over twenty years, studying with Zen Masters Sheng Yen and Thich Nhat Hanh, and has been actualizing the practice through his music and caring for his students.*

## 1.4: Miles Dunmore, English Teacher

The American School in London, United Kingdom

“I am most interested in teacher development, having teachers develop an authentic teaching presence inside and outside the classroom. This means supporting teachers to cultivate a compassionate and yet firm persona. Because the practice of mindfulness enables us to understand ourselves more deeply and feel more solid and with that more relaxed, the benefits transmit readily to the classroom and the students.”



We met Miles Dunmore during Wake Up Schools, an international retreat and course for educators, led by Thich Nhat

Hanh in Barcelona, Spain. Wake Up Schools, an initiative launched by Nhat Hanh and the international Plum Village community, provides educators, students, parents, and the entire school community with mindfulness programs to promote and support a happy and healthy school environment. Miles, along with Pilar Aguilera mentioned in Chapter 2 page 72, is among the leading proponents of mindfulness in Europe. During the retreat, Miles served as a panelist along with Pilar, speaking to an audience of more than 600 educators from throughout Spain to talk about his work as a school leader and about mindfulness in schools. We spoke to Miles just after breakfast while at the University of Barcelona during the five-day Wake Up Schools course.

Miles beams high energy and immediately captures our attention with his boyish enthusiasm and quick British wit. His passion for mindfulness and education, his focused attention from years of practice of mindfulness, and his clarity are apparent and a total delight. On this bright, clear spring morning in Spain, we begin our interview with Miles. He speaks openly about mindfulness and school leadership.

“The work of teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh, Jon Kabat-Zinn, and the Dalai Lama, has laid a strong foundation for mindfulness in schools. Advances in neuroscience have created legitimacy and have opened the door to the possibility of bringing mindfulness into schools. Science now clearly demonstrates the benefits of this approach not just for students and teachers, but for leaders too. We are leaning into a paradigm shift with new discoveries in neuroscience showing how mindfulness affects the workings of the brain and the body, and so learning.

“I first began practicing mindfulness 20 years ago when I worked as a school department head in the United States, where I lived for 17 years. I read a lot about mindfulness, especially books by Thich Nhat Hanh, as well as other teachers. I learned simple mindfulness techniques mainly from the Tibetan tradition. I moved back to London in 2001 and found an established mindfulness community or *sangha*, the Heart of London Sangha, which is still vigorous and growing today. My weekly mindfulness meditation practice with this group is indispensable. I find practice with a group to be foundational. As a long-time department head, some things have become very clear to me. It is important to have a firm understanding of where to take a department and to have really good people skills. But most importantly, my job as a school leader is to inspire and motivate teachers and others in the school community to teach and lead from their most authentic selves and to encourage teachers to develop a classroom presence that is authentic. I found great resources for this in mindfulness practices.

“I am most interested in teacher development, having teachers develop an authentic teaching presence inside and outside the classroom. This means supporting teachers to cultivate a compassionate and yet firm persona. Because the practice of mindfulness enables us to understand ourselves more deeply and feel more solid and with that more relaxed, the benefits transmit readily to the classroom and to the students.”

Miles adjusts his seat to avoid the direct, bright sunlight and then continues, his clear blue eyes full of vibrancy. We sense his urgency and passion with each word.

“School leadership demands time and energy. It is complex and requires a constant balancing of constituencies. The development of a personal mindfulness meditation practice gives school leaders a little more space and a little more time. The interesting thing is that taking time for mindfulness makes school leaders feel as if they have more time, not less. And, this translates into greater pleasure in the work and less tension.

“Mindfulness improves our social skills, our ability to relate to others. As school leaders, our interactions with teachers, parents, and students can be tense and pressure filled, but with mindfulness we have a greater ability to calm ourselves, to ease tension within our bodies and minds, and that affects how we interact with others.

“It’s really clear to me that with greater appreciation of mindfulness for school leaders, teachers, and students, for the entire school community, we will promote global understanding and prepare students to achieve in a rapidly changing and very complex world, and in the process to live their lives more fully and in a way that makes them feel more free.”

*Miles has taught in state and independent schools in the United Kingdom and in the United States. A department head for many years, he has a deep interest in how teachers form their teaching selves and in how they deal with challenge and stress. In 2012, he was one of the planners for the United Kingdom Educators’ Retreat led by Thich Nhat Hanh. As well as teaching, he now works with educators in building supportive communities together, both as fellow professionals and within their schools.*

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