



We Care Schools create a culture of caring as both a starting strategy and destination outcome. **Strategy:** Adjust education system design to prioritize a school and community culture of caring. **Outcome:** The culture of caring is a platform environment or ecosystem that aligns and continually grows with individual and collective gains in relational capacities, knowledge, and skills. This is the foundational soil for growing *ever-renewing community* as a whole system of relationships.

We Care Schools engage teachers, students, parents, staff, and partners in creating pathways to a unique to each school culture of caring as the foundation for learning and community.

The Back Story... **We Care Schools** (WCS) enhance the learning environment by adapting principles and practices of Community Renewal International's (CR) *Relational Foundation model*. WCS began in the 2018-19 school year as a collaborative initiative between University Elementary (UES) and CR Institute. UES was a 1,100-student public school designed for 400. It is a neighborhood school serving 13 neighborhoods that include the wealthiest and poorest, making UES the most socio-economically and culturally diverse school in the Caddo Parish system. UES receives no Title 1 funding to support those qualifying students that number more than many Title 1 schools. Administrators and educators face mind-boggling challenges every day. After 5 years of prioritizing a culture of caring, positive outcomes are inspiring other schools to join the experiment. A community of practice formed during 2021 to better understand and develop the powers of caring together. Our belief is that each school's culture will be unique to the relationships in their school community. We anticipate each school that joins will discover new thinking and doing to grow the body of knowledge.

The Big Picture... **Community Renewal** sees the fundamental cause for symptoms of societal decline is *relational disconnection*. The solution CR began actualizing in 1994 and continuing to develop is *relational connection*. Seeing cities and society as a whole system of relationships, CR connects willing people, across all lines of difference, to prioritize what everyone shares, a capacity to care. Prioritizing caring allows diversity to become a creative asset in overcoming mindsets that blind us to larger truths and realities. This growing network of caring people become a new citywide asset CR calls the *Relational Foundation**. Resources embedded in that caring network exponentially grow individual and collective capacities to respond to needs, opportunities, and learning that strengthens community as an adaptive whole. CR applies and scales *rules of positive relationships** citywide, opening pathways to *Ever-Renewing Community**.

Why it matters: School challenges with behavior, attendance, teacher retention, failing schools, test scores, and students falling through system cracks are all symptoms that share a fundamental cause, *relational disconnection*. Currently education system design can be described as a "cradle to career pipeline" with no intentional outcomes for community. Success in the current competitive system contributes to producing lonely people attached to a job and detached from family and community. WCS adjusts the system design by prioritizing a culture of caring as the soil from which *Whole Persons** grow and the foundation upon which to build community wholeness (*CR Village Framework**). Educators might reflect on addressing Maslow's (hierarchy of needs) before Bloom's (taxonomy for teaching and learning).



Getting Started: Thinking differently and shifting the focus of the school community is the starting challenge. The path to creating a culture of caring begins by seeing what is visible everywhere but hidden by our societal and education system mindsets. Look for and celebrate caring acts. A helpful CR rule for growing positive relationships: *start with what we share in common*. CR believes everyone shares a *capacity to care*. Creating new rituals and practices for seeing and celebrating the infinite number of caring acts taking place before you will encourage seeing more and doing more caring acts. Here are some practical steps for getting started:

1. Contact the CR Institute or a We Care School to share your interest. You will receive information about WCS (documents, videos and articles). Attend a weekly WCS Community of Practice Zoom to talk with principals and CR guides involved in WCS.
2. Tour University Elementary, our pilot We Care School. Following the tour meet with CR Institute to chart a course for becoming a WCS.
3. Assemble a leadership core team for your school.
4. Schedule a half-day CR WCS workshop and planning session for your leadership team. CR Institute conducts the workshop. The leadership team will serve as table guides for a workshop for all school educators and staff prior to the start of a school year launch of a WCS.
5. Develop a WCS action plan customized for your school by answering a list of WCS opportunity questions that frame your plan. CR Institute will assist in designing Caught-You-Caring game cards and Pathfinder Awards certificates.
6. Leadership core team attend a one-day CR Experience to gain a deeper understanding about the CR model and how it works citywide. CR Experiences are offered 5 or 6 times a year. For groups of 8 or more a custom date can be added to the schedule.
7. Schedule a WCS launch workshop for all school educators and staff. Including key parents and partners is encouraged. Leadership core team to serve as table guides for the workshop.
8. Participate in the WCS Community of Practice weekly Zooms for mentoring, sharing your progress, and collaborating on challenges, opportunities, and innovations.
9. Have fun guiding the power of caring together and growing a relational leadership network.

How it works: A few of the CR principles and practices WCS adapt to create pathways to a unique school culture of caring:

- ***Caring relationships are our most valuable and value-creating resource*** (R. Hall)... We Care Schools explore this reality, placing *mutually enhancing relationships** as the top priority in preparing students for a meaningful life in community. We find abundance through relationships (McKnight). **Story example...**Abundance through relationships occurred when Community Renewal trained volunteer block leader Mary Richter connected her friend Principal Kasie Mainiero to Community Renewal Institute. From Mary's insight, *We Care Schools* is emerging.
- ***Scaling the rules of positive relationships...*** Among the very long list of rules for positive relationships we focus on three: dynamic nature, intentionality, and commonality. **Story example...**When CR founder Mack McCarter learned that society is a system of relationships, he knew that society could be healed and renewed by scaling rules of positive relationships. That revelation led to the next epiphany of what everyone shares. Intentionally connecting people in their shared capacity to care allows differences to become creative assets rather than polarizing forces. Prioritizing caring creates a path for conflict to shift from *arguing to win* to *arguing to agreement*.



- **Pathfinding to the powers of caring together ...** Teachers learn that “students don’t care what you know until they know that you care,” but they are left to individually apply that wisdom. Caring alone is not stopping societal decline. Caring together can. WCS’s experiment in pathfinding initiatives that grow capacities of caring together. There are many paths to discover and stories about the journey to tell. Individuals or groups that increase our understanding of the culture of caring are celebrated with *Pathfinder Awards*. **Story example...** A socially awkward UES fourth grade House of Mercy student, Victor (pseudonym), was mentored by the AP to create what became the Recess Rangers to encourage caring behavior. Victor designed training for willing volunteers. When he was recognized as the first student Pathfinder Award recipient, over 40 Recess Rangers stood to celebrate Victor’s recognition. For the first time in the history of recess there were no behavior problems. The power of caring together.
- **Community [society] is a whole system of relationships...** We Care Schools adapt CR’s theoretical perspectives of thinking and seeing both individuals and community holistically. Adapting *Whole Persons** and *CR Village Framework** to school community culture provides structure for holistically considering community as a whole system of relationships. Understanding relational connections and information flows between the 8 village framework elements offers new insights about the need for intentional education outcomes that grow and strengthen community relational capacities. **Story example...** *Growing Greener Communities through Schools* piloted at UES to experiment with using the collaboration discipline of Strategic Doing to equip 5th graders to lead by framing powerful questions. This experiment addresses climate anxiety with collective action. The CR village framework provided a way to organize community resources as a whole ecology of community relationships.
- **Wholeness grows through positive relationships...Ubuntu, I am because we are (African Proverb)...** We grow to our potential wholeness, individually and collectively, through our positive relationships. We cannot grow wholeness alone. “Selfishness beats altruism within a group. Altruistic groups beat selfish groups. Everything else is commentary” (D.S. Wilson). **Story example...** HES fourth grade House of Valor student, Keith (pseudonym), has a gift to respectfully and with kindness challenge himself and his classmates to constantly improve. Through his hard work, initiative, and persistence **Kevin** helps us see how we grow to our potential wholeness, individually and collectively, through caring relationships.
- **Connect Caring Capacities across lines of difference...** Schools are designed to divide students and teachers by grade level. We Care Schools cross those invisible boundaries. **Story example...** UES responded to this challenge by creating conceptual houses that include all grade levels (students, teachers, and staff). Houses are named for virtuous characteristics that are studied and celebrated. Lower grade students look up to upper grade students. Upper grade students are looking out for lower grade students. Teacher cliques have disappeared. UES principal Ashley Atkins is now growing a practice of intentionally connecting across lines of difference.
- **Relational leaders and shared leadership...** *Caught-You-Caring (CYC)* is a WCS card game designed to intentionally shift attention to see and celebrate the many small acts of caring committed every day. Observing and documenting caring acts is skill-building to see good in others, a character trait for Relational Leaders...House points scoring, service projects and celebrations shift competition to *coopetition* (competing about cooperation) that grows relational capacities for collaboration and deliberation. **Story example...** UES House of Peace First Grade teacher Anna Boyter added to our understanding of relational leadership by encouraging her students to observe caring acts, marking a transition from only teachers giving CYC cards to students writing caring acts of other students and adults. Anna received a Pathfinder Award for her creative initiative.



- **Growing relational capacities from a culture of caring...** As the culture of caring has grown at UES, new programs are unified in the purpose of growing relational capacities and boundaries of caring. **Story example...** UES teacher Charles Moser introduced caring into the “Blast Lab” science curriculum which resulted in student performance gains. Other additions over time included: restorative justice, ACE’s (adverse childhood experiences) training, TBRI (trust-based relational intervention), VYJ behavioral crisis response team including calming room, Strategic Doing open network collaboration, and Growing Greener climate resilience. Culture of caring capacities are *ever-renewing* and growing exponentially.
- **Intentionally connecting schools to community outcomes...** For our children, communities are places of discovery to engage life possibilities through people who are creating the world around them. The education system moved away from that reality, minimizing the importance of helping students understand connections of life to place. We Care Schools seek to help students find purpose in strengthening their community, not escaping it. **Story example...** Tina Kendrick, CR Catalyst and volunteer champion for Homer Elementary WCS has guided two pathfinding initiatives for connecting school to community outcomes. The first, *Campus Beautification*. Second, she recruited a diverse team of 15 civic leaders to form *We Care Reading Café*. This volunteer team brings the power of caring together, reading to every pre-k through 2nd grade class twice monthly. Volunteers know and are known by students and teachers. With continued intention, new pathfinder initiatives will progressively and cumulatively connect education to community outcomes.
- **Reflecting and sharing stories of transformation...** Pathfinding to a culture of caring is an adventure of discovery and struggle to find purpose in community. Reflecting on gratitude for positive stories of the journey is mutually encouraging when that reflection is shared with others. The journey alone is challenging and at times overwhelming. Reflecting together with gratitude for each other re-energizes. We Care Schools create space for teachers to regularly come together and share positive stories about creating a culture of caring. **Story example...** This practice is adapted from CR Monday morning staff gatherings that are patterned after an old Quaker discipline called *The Inner Light: We come determined to neither speak nor remain silent, but as led by the spirit share positive stories of encouragement in our work together*. This practice is credited with the longevity of CR staff living and serving in concentrated disadvantage areas of the city. The average burnout rate for this type of social work is 2 years. CR staff averages 16 years with the longest serving recently retiring after 26 years.

What Science and Data tell us: Increasingly science is recognizing that community is the answer to the many complex adaptive questions shaping our pathways to the future. Hierarchies and linear thinking work well when situations and outcomes are predictable. However, when uncertainty is high and situations change rapidly, hierarchies get in the way. In an environment where no one can tell anyone what to do, we need shared leadership skills to guide open networks of trusted relationships inventing our shared future we create together.

- **What we think about we become...** Brain science shows that *doing a caring act, observing a caring act, hearing about a caring act, or writing about a caring act* all produce the same positive brain chemicals (Serotonin, Dopamine, Oxytocin) that enhance our well-being (socially, emotionally, physically) including our abilities to learn. What we seek we find. Prioritizing and focusing on caring acts exposes what was always available to us, we just were not looking for it. Embracing rules of positive relationships (dynamic nature, intentionality, commonality) leads to new practices and rituals that provide reinforcing feedback or learning loops.



- **Society is a [whole] system of relationships...** The societal system of relationships has a predominant nature that has foundational influences on outcomes experienced in all system parts and subsystems. That predominant nature can be changed by altering societal aspirational values. Economist EF Schumacher and more recently political scientist Robert Putnam provide evidence that connects societal outcomes to influences that shift the predominant nature. Those influences move society toward blinding forces of *hyper-individualism (relational disconnection where greed is good)* or toward healing forces of *other centeredness (relational connection of love and caring)*.

Going Deeper:

- We shape our cities, then our cities shape us.
- Our future is the outcome of the questions we seek to answer.

The current well-being conditions of cities shaped over the last 60 years suggests we are seeking answers to wrong questions. So many thoughts and actions are controlled by mindsets deeply embedded in our subconscious, often blinding us when our beliefs and actions unknowingly contribute to outcomes we don't like or want. Changing mindsets is hard and important for transformative changes we need. It requires thinking differently, renewing our mind.

We move in the direction of our conversations (Cooperrider). You can never get to the bottom of a problem-centric conversation. If we change direction, converting the problem into an opportunity, we attract willing people to join the conversation. Opportunity conversations move those around the table to action cycles of learning by doing experiments, adjusting course to what works. Successful small starting steps together grow trust, confidence, and relationships to take on increasingly complex tasks producing solutions to complex adaptive challenges.

We Care Schools prepare students and educators to embrace the uncertainty and adaptive challenges of their future by caring about place and caring about each other. Their future will be found in abilities to frame adaptive questions as opportunities accessed when diverse perspectives collaborate, seeing realities more clearly. These adaptive questions have many answers to explore by learning and doing together (caring together), forming pathways that incrementally bring imagined success outcomes lovingly and persistently into existence. Community is the answer...for healing social divisions, for climate change resilience, for re-localizing economies, for discovering genius in unlikely places... We Care Schools reconnecting schools to intentional community outcomes is a direction for growing values of common good and for continually moving our cities toward equity. Cities are only as strong as their weakest neighborhood.

- Prioritizing our capacities to care influences the nature of the whole community system of relationships.
- Where we are going, our big outcome, is a culture of caring. How we get there is by growing relational capacities, our most valuable and value creating resource. We start slowly to go fast. Abundance and our shared capacities grow at the speed of trust.
- A culture of caring provides the why for education, providing unity and coherence for knowledge and behavior. Adding programs and new curriculums is viewed as adding capacities to our shared culture.

The Bottom Line:

Prioritizing a culture of caring as foundational for learning and community prepares our children to thrive in a complex world with a resilience mindset of finding abundance through diverse relationships. Equipped with



the power of caring together, students will shape a better world through their shared leadership. They will invent pathways of trusted networks answering powerful opportunity questions that address many adaptive challenges they will encounter in life.

A data story is emerging at University Elementary WCS. The first observed change was *behavior* evidenced by a 98% reduction in office referrals and a 94% drop in suspensions. Next, *attendance* improved as documented by a drop in truancy significantly below Caddo school system averages. Then, teacher retention, a national problem, improved and there is now a waiting list to teach at UES. Surveys reveal very high levels of teacher satisfaction. Last year (2021-22) when test scores across the country declined during covid, UES test scores were up double digits.

The Upside for You:

We find abundance through relationships. We access the power of caring together through positive relationships. It is an inner-directed others-focused adventure of transforming education and community.

Community Renewal (CRI) connects people across all lines of difference in their shared capacity to care. This network of caring forms a new citywide asset, the relational foundation, that turns on the power of caring together. Trust and emergent creativity are notable characteristics of this network asset.

A new citywide asset grows as a network of caring that forms the relational foundation. Cities and society are a whole system of relationships. The predominant nature of the whole system of relationships affects the way we experience life. Creating a school culture of caring contributes to a shift in the predominant nature of the whole system of relationships, from greed is good, to loving and caring.

*CR Terms...

Relational Foundation... A network of caring people, connected across all lines of difference, growing trust through *mutually enhancing relationships* (words and actions align in predominantly other centeredness).

Rules of Positive Relationships... Dynamic nature, intentionality, and Commonality

Whole Persons... People, individually and collectively, who are both Compassionate (giving) and Competent (growing). Compassion is seeking the good of others as seeking own good. Competence is the ability to access resources to grow spiritually, socially, skillfully, physically, intellectually, and emotionally.

Village Framework... A structure for understanding community as a whole system of relationships. There are seven fundamental elements (Safety, Health, Education, Meaningful Work, Housing, Culture of Caring, Leadership) growing from and influenced by an eighth element, the Relational Foundation.

Ever-Renewing Community... The outcome of applying and scaling the rule of positive relationships to the whole system of relationships within community and society. For the first time in the history of civilizations humanity achieves a civilization that continuously improves and regenerates, growing relationally exponentially without limits.

Mutually Enhancing Relationships... Relationships that grow mutual wholeness. Situations where the giver is also a receiver, where differences become shared creative assets, and where shared purpose grows trust.