

WE CARE SCHOOLS GROWING AS A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE



Your work is inspiring. It represents important innovations in how we should prepare future education leadership.” The head of the academic review team made this comment in response to Kasie Mainiero’s Spring 2023 dissertation defense presentation. Kasie’s dissertation is a reflective case study of her personal experiences and knowledge generated from co-creating “We Care Schools” with Community Renewal beginning in 2018. “The road from school to prison is paved with unmet needs. This foundation of caring, laid strongly on our children’s path, will carry them into a better future,” Kasie said.

Along with a doctoral degree and transformational successes at University Elementary We Care School (gains in student behavior, attendance, teacher retention, and test scores) came an opportunity challenge. Kasie accepted a newly created position with the 66-school Caddo Parish system, Child Well-Being Specialist. Now her foundational work at University Elementary grows through guidance from Principal Ashley Atkins, a colleague in creating We Care Schools.

In her new role, Kasie visits all schools, assesses their culture, and invites interested principals to a weekly Community Renewal We Care Schools Community of Practice Zoom. Every Thursday principals or their designee gather to share encouraging stories about creating a school culture of caring. Two We Care Schools last year, University (UES) and Homer Elementary, have grown to twelve at the beginning of the 2023-24 school year. More principals are expressing interest. We Care Schools engage their school community in creating pathways to a culture of caring as the foundational priority for learning and community. Each school forms a core team, then begins with a CR workshop and action plan that answers 10 challenge questions for adapting CRI principles and practices to education.

The culture that grows is unique to the relationships at each school.

CRI’s Dianne Loridans works with each We Care School to custom design Caught-You-Caring (CYC) cards that are used as a fun way to cultivate students’ and teachers’ abilities to see good in others, a relational leadership skill. Dianne shared at a recent CRI Monday morning gathering, “My favorite part of every week is our We Care Schools Community of Practice (CoP) meetings.” The following paragraphs are a sampling of the creativity shared at weekly CoP Zoom meetings.

- UES Principal Ashley Atkins held up a 1-inch-thick stack of CYC cards. “This is the cards received in the last 2 days. I am reading 5 to 7 over the intercom to start every school day.” UES responded to a WCS challenge, connect relationships across lines of difference, by creating six conceptual houses named for a characteristic of caring. Each “House” includes students and staff of all grade levels.

- Riverside Elementary Principal Kelly Hobson created a positive referral practice as a pathfinder project, “Teachers send students to my office with a written positive referral. I praise the students for their positive behavior, then we call their parents. Parents are surprised, expecting calls from principals to be about something bad. This cultural shift is positively impacting students, teachers, parents, and school community.”

- Mansfield Elementary Principal Amanda Lafollette shared, “We have created ‘Care Teams’ structured to care for students, care for teachers, and care for community. Teams consider every aspect of education through the lens of caring.” “PAWSitive” Referrals, Wolverine Way and Random Acts of Kindness House Challenges are among new activities growing the school culture of caring.

- Nicolas Cunningham, North Caddo Elementary Middle School principal, and his core

team created a We Care School flag that flies below the US flag at the Vivian school. He gladly shared an extra flag with Mansfield Elementary when asked. North Caddo broadcast media students designed and produced videos of students and teachers in situational performances that contrast both non-caring and caring response behaviors. Inspired, Riverside produced skits that demonstrate caring behavior to students.

- Principal LaToria Stewart, with her core team, designed and celebrated We Care Week at Broadmoor Elementary Middle School in early October. A group of eight 3rd-7th graders, the Quest Girls, posted personalized messages on doors of all teachers, counselors, and administrators: “Today you may face big challenges, impossible tasks, or difficult problems. Or you may not, and your team might. Whatever the case may be, put on your BRAVE face and LEAD! WE LOVE YOU.”

- In South Knoxville, Tennessee, Mooreland Heights Elementary Principal, Kevin “Josh” Van Pelt shifts relational challenges into opportunity mindsets, encouraging his staff to embrace conflict situations in ways that grow the school culture of caring. He is also addressing a WCS challenge to create intentional education outcomes for community. In partnerships with locally owned businesses, project-based learning experiences are being collaboratively designed to help students explore opportunities to find their purpose in community.

- Marceline Tingue recently initiated We Care School in Yaoundé, Cameroon. On Mondays, teachers receive from every student an “I Care Card” describing a kindness they committed the prior week. They are engaging in a CRI practice that “change starts with me.”