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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Stories of Caring School Leadership*. In this excerpt, the power of caring school leadership is exemplified through a principals story.

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## 10. Sheila

—Told by the principal of an urban elementary school

Sheila came to us to begin the second grade from a Title I inner-city school with an enrollment that was majority minority. She came here—a well-resourced, predominantly white suburban school. It was difficult for her to leave a school where she was known and loved by many and come into a place where she knew no one and where few were like her.

Sheila was excited and eager to make new friends. A naturally social kid, she reached out to other kids to make friends the same way she had at her previous school—by being her precocious, outgoing, humorous self. But cultures clashed. She was not very well received by her peers or adults in the school. Every day of her second-grade year, her innocent, well-intentioned attempts to engage classmates through jokes, pokes, puns, fun, and games, were resisted by other students and reprimanded by teachers. She was sentenced to lunch and recess detention nearly every day that school year, depriving her of much-needed opportunities to build positive peer relationships.

Teachers also didn't recognize Sheila's intellectual prowess. She completed every assignment accurately and often finished her work early. She aced every test and quiz, and despite a 99 percent average in every subject on her report card and requests for more challenging work, Sheila's need for advanced work and enrichment went unmet. So Sheila sought to meet that need herself. She quietly entertained herself at her desk with her school supplies. She was told to put them away. When she didn't, her teacher often took them away, annoyed at what she perceived as Sheila's refusal to follow directions. A happy-go-lucky kid, Sheila was confused by her teacher's apparent frustration with her. But Sheila never let that get her down. Refusing to let boredom get the better of her, Sheila tried to play with her classmates, but they were too busy

trying to finish the assignments she had already completed.

One day, Sheila figured out a way to get her class partner to lighten up by engaging him in play. She noticed he had a really cool eraser in his desk, so she grabbed it and waited for him to respond. Much to her chagrin, he didn't. She put it back and tried again, but he still didn't seem to notice. On her third try, she snagged the eraser, then waited and waited. Surely he would notice, right? She waited and waited longer. Finally, she tapped him on the shoulder, held up the eraser, and smiled, hoping he'd smile and join the game. He didn't and yelled, "Hey, I'm telling you stole my eraser!" Shocked by his accusation, Sheila immediately returned his eraser to its resting place on his desk. "No, I didn't," she said. "I just wanted to play with you." He insisted that she stole his eraser and marched off to tell the teacher, who promptly sent Sheila to the office with a yellow office referral slip in hand.

Seated in the principal's office, Sheila read and reread the yellow slip that named her a thief, wondering how she ended up here. She had never been in this much trouble before. She had been the star student at her old school and the first-grade spelling bee champion. The trophy sat proudly atop the mantel piece over her fireplace at home. But now, she was a thief.

Sheila's heart sank as she entered the principal's office. Not knowing what to expect, her eyes lowered to the floor. "Have a seat." She stared at her feet and sheepishly took a seat, her heart pounding in her chest, nearly ready to explode. What would happen? Would she be sent to the behavior improvement room? Suspended? Expelled? What would her parents say?

"Sheila," the principal spoke. It was a familiar voice. Sheila slowly raised her eyes and came

to focus on someone she knew. In this sea of strangers, a familiar face. “Ms. Jones!” Sheila exclaimed. Her new principal had been the vice principal at her old school and knew Sheila to be a stellar student. “What are you doing here?” “I should be asking you the same thing,” Ms. Jones smiled and said. “I was offered the opportunity to become principal here, and it was a tough choice. I didn’t want to leave our old school because I’d miss everyone there. But seeing you walk into my office just made my day! I am so happy to see you, though not quite under these circumstances. Looks like we’re both new here and still adjusting. Can you tell me about how things are going for you?”

Sheila opened up to Ms. Jones and shared her experiences, every detail, from her failed attempts to make friends and the frequent lunch detentions, down to the eraser incident. “Sounds like it’s been a bit of a rocky transition for you, would you say?” Ms. Jones said. Sheila nodded. Ms. Jones asked, “May I please see your yellow slip?” Embarrassed and reluctantly, Sheila handed Ms. Jones the yellow slip. Ms. Jones read it, then gingerly dropped it into the garbage bin beside her desk. This simple act of kindness showed Sheila that someone at this school really knew her and actually cared about her.

“I know this isn’t who you are,” Mrs. Jones affirmed. “You’re an amazing student who’s trying to make new friends and adjust to a new school. That can be really hard. I’ll tell you what. I’ll give your parents a call to let them know that we talked about this, and I’ll let your teacher know that we talked. But you don’t deserve a yellow slip, detention, or anything like that. Just make wise choices from now on. Taking another student’s belongings is not the best way to make friends. Try talking to them during lunch and recess. And I would love for you to drop by and visit me sometimes. But I don’t want any more yellow slips. Think we can do that?”

Sheila nodded, grateful for the grace shown by her principal during this caring conversation.

Determined to fulfill her pledge and rise to her principal’s expectations, Sheila did everything in her power to keep her hands to herself. She returned to her classroom and was eyed suspiciously by her teacher, who seemed surprised by her return. Sheila received extra scrutiny after this office visit. She began to think that her teacher did not seem to care for her very much because everything Sheila did seemed to get her into trouble, although not yellow slip trouble. When Sheila asked questions, her teacher would say, “You should have been listening, Sheila!” When she answered questions, her teacher would say, “Stop calling out, Sheila!” When she finished her work early, her teacher would say, “Go back and check your work, Sheila.” And when playing with other kids, her teacher would say, “Not so rough, Sheila!” “Keep your hands to yourself, Sheila. “Don’t do that, Sheila.” “Don’t say that, Sheila.” And when she tried to explain herself, her teacher would say, “Stop being disrespectful, Sheila.” Sheila decided not to say or do anything in class that could spark the ire of her teacher or rejection by her peers. The vibrant, bubbly little seven-year-old began to withdraw.

By third grade, Sheila had become much quieter and resolute, promising herself she would not get in trouble this year. Noticing her change in behavior, Ms. Jones began doing regular check-ins with Sheila just to talk about her school life. These check-ins became the highlight of Sheila’s third-grade year. Sheila was able to share her successes and challenges. Ms. Jones supported Sheila in navigating tricky social terrains. There was someone in this building who knew her and cared about her well-being.

This made all the difference when Sheila began being bullied at the bus stop and on the school bus. Sheila was much smaller than the other third graders and, in fact, smaller than many of the second graders. Older kids and bigger kids teased her, called her names, mocked the way she talked. “You talk so white!” they would

say. Once, some kids threw rocks at her at the bus stop. After the rock-throwing incident, Sheila didn't know who to tell. It didn't happen at school. It didn't happen at home. And even if she knew who to tell, she was afraid to. It was already hard enough making friends. It would be even harder if kids believed she was a snitch.

One afternoon during the bus ride home, a second grader, Marilyn, who was twice Sheila's size and had repeated first grade, grabbed one of Sheila's long, braided ponytails and pulled hard. Sheila screamed in pain and begged her to stop. Marilyn laughed and pulled harder. The bus driver couldn't see what was happening. Sheila fought back tears, refusing to cry in front of everyone. "Stop!" Sheila screamed again. Marilyn yanked harder still and held on relentlessly. For nearly fifteen minutes, Marilyn tugged, pulled, and laughed, ignoring Sheila's pleas until the bus stopped at Sheila's destination. Marilyn promptly

released Sheila's braid so the bus driver wouldn't see as he looked up into the rearview mirror at students. Sheila grabbed her backpack and ran off the bus in tears, kids' laughter spilling from the bus windows. Sheila burst into her grandmother's house and recounted the whole ordeal. Grandma checked Sheila's reddened scalp and loosened braid with grave concern. She called the school immediately and reported the incident to the principal.

The next morning, Ms. Jones called Sheila into her office to find out what happened. "I'm so sorry that happened to you, and it's not OK. Would you mind if I called Marilyn into my office right now to apologize to you?" Ms. Jones asked. Sheila consented. When Marilyn arrived, Ms. Jones asked what happened. Marilyn confessed to everything and apologized to Sheila. Ms. Jones asserted in the presence of both girls, "If you put your hands on Sheila or bother her in any way again, you



**Can I Help You? Caroline Semier, Grade 2**

will be suspended. Do you understand me?” Marilyn solemnly nodded and hurried back to class. Ms. Jones hugged Sheila and encouraged, “If anyone else bothers you or does anything to you, please let me know immediately. OK?” Sheila hugged Ms. Jones again. She felt loved and protected. Things began turning around for Sheila after that.

Such caring transformed Sheila’s life. She was on the road to becoming disengaged and a discipline problem in a school system where the odds were stacked against her. Caring empowered Sheila to strive to overcome, knowing she had an ally in her corner. By the end of her third-grade year, the kids in her class had warmed up to Sheila, and she had formed a few really close connections. Some of her classmates had begun to ask Sheila for help when they struggled with math, reading, and writing. Her third-grade teacher noticed her intellect and quick wit, recommending her for gifted and talented testing

in the fourth grade. Sheila was admitted into the gifted and talented program in the fifth grade. She blossomed academically and socially. She won numerous awards and was recognized for scholastic achievement.

Sheila eventually graduated from high school with honors, attended a university on a full academic scholarship, and majored in education. She taught for sixteen years trying to provide the same caring for her students who had changed her life. Sheila later graduated with high honors and a second master’s degree in school leadership at the top of her class at Harvard. Committed to caring leadership and paying it forward, Sheila is currently working on her doctorate in educational leadership at Vanderbilt University. Sheila has dedicated her life to affecting systemic change to support the needs of marginalized, disenfranchised, and diverse learners like herself.

I am Sheila.