

The Mindful School Leader

*Practices to Transform Your
Leadership and School*

Valerie Brown • Kirsten Olson
Foreword by Richard Brady



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Foreword

When my friends Valerie and Kirsten first told me they were writing a book on mindfulness for school leaders, I so wished their book had been available when I began to practice mindfulness. In 1984, during a silent meal at a Quaker retreat center, someone read a passage on how to eat a tangerine. It was from *The Miracle of Mindfulness* by Thich Nhat Hanh. I had never heard of contemplating one's food while eating. I bought the book. Later, when I read the first lesson in it about how to have unlimited time for oneself, I felt compelled to read the whole book to my high school math students. At that time, reading about mindfulness was like reading science fiction. I knew no one who practiced mindfulness, inside or outside the classroom. It seemed impossible to get to the life I was reading about from where I was. Perhaps this describes your situation. Where do you start? What do you do?

The Mindful School Leader is an ideal place to start. By the time you've finished reading it, you'll likely have some next steps. I lacked a guide like Valerie and Kirsten's book, but I was fortunate to be able to attend a retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh in person in 1989. This experience inspired me to begin a personal mindfulness practice. But for years I kept my personal practice separate from my life as an educator.

Over the last thirty years, numerous books on mindfulness have been written. Early books, like *When Things Fall Apart* by Pema Chödrön, focus on mindfulness practices. They were written primarily by Buddhist monastics and lay teachers. As research began to reveal the neuroplasticity of the brain, books on brain science and the effects of mindfulness on mental and physical well-being, such as *Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain* by Sharon Begley, began to be written by scientists and science writers. Meanwhile, Jon Kabat-Zinn, the creator of what might be termed "applied mindfulness," was

establishing mindfulness-based stress-reduction (MBSR) programs and, starting in 1990 with *Full Catastrophe Living*, writing books about his work.

People in the field of education discovered mindfulness relatively recently. The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society began awarding contemplative practice fellowships to academics only in 1997. In 2005, the center held its first conference and contemplative curriculum development workshop. In 2001, a group of K–12 educators and academics founded the Mindfulness in Education Network (MiEN) to enable educators interested in mindfulness to be part of an online community. Early K–12 mindfulness programs include Susan Kaiser Greenland’s “Inner Kids” program in Los Angeles, established in 2005, and Mindful Schools in Oakland, established in 2007 by Laurie Grossman, Richard Shankman, and Megan Cowan. In 2005, the Garrison Institute issued its report *Contemplation and Education—Current Status of Programs Using Contemplative Techniques in K–12 Educational Settings*. The first books on mindfulness in education appeared in 2009: *Tuning In: Mindfulness in Teaching and Learning* edited by Irene McHenry and Richard Brady, followed by Deborah Schoeberlein and Suki Sheth’s *Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness*.

In spite of Parker J. Palmer’s observation that “We teach who we are,” the student, not the teacher, is the focus of most mindfulness programs in education. A notable exception is Garrison Institute’s CARE for Teachers, *a unique program designed to help teachers reduce stress and enliven their teaching by promoting awareness, presence, compassion, reflection, and inspiration—the inner resources they need to help students flourish, socially, emotionally, and academically.*² With a few small modifications, this description applies perfectly to the book you’re now reading, *The Mindful School Leader*. Here, Valerie and Kirsten, aided by the school leaders they interview, paint a rich picture of many ways leaders can transform their personal and professional lives and, in so doing, transform their institutions. In the process, the authors also present research that substantiates the positive impact of mindfulness practice on mental and physical health.

I vividly recall sitting in a circle of 32 participants at the opening of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society’s first contemplative curriculum development workshop. I had come to develop a contemplative component for my tenth-grade geometry course. One by one, we introduced ourselves and spoke briefly about a course we would be working on. Two participants reported they had already introduced contemplative practices in their courses the previous year.

Both had received the highest ratings of their careers from students. Hearing this, my remaining doubt about the rightness of bringing mindfulness to my school was dispelled. This is what I'd been missing—success stories from other educators. This is what makes *The Mindful School Leader* compelling and unique, the stories of school leaders who have used mindfulness practice to become more focused, avoid burnout, improve communication, relieve their staffs' stress, and meet a host of other challenges. The trials these leaders faced are common. The ways these leaders addressed them are not. Valerie and Kirsten's skillful rendering of the practices these leaders employ now makes them available to you, the reader. The rest is up to you.

Richard Brady
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