What Your Colleagues Are Saying . . .

You need to buy two copies of this book. One to keep on your desk so you can grab it when you need immediate strategies to handle the challenges that arise. The other to keep on your bedside table so you can read it again for comfort, reassurance, and encouragement. This is the book that will keep you in education . . . sane, calm, competent, and resilient.

—Roselind Wiseman
Co-founder of Cultures of Dignity
Boulder, CO

This new edition is hardcore. Newly updated with their characteristic humor, real classroom examples, robust new research, action steps, and appendices worth the price alone, Debbie and Jack have outdone themselves. This is real aloe on the wounds and a bright lantern for the way forward to converting radical hope into effective educational practice while finding grounds for joy along the way.

—Rick Wormeli
Teacher/Principal Training and Author
Herdon, VA

With *Deliberate Optimism* you will have everything you need to reimagine an environment of passion and purpose. It is an essential guide for achieving the best version of yourself! Every teacher and district team member should be given this book to help them accelerate kindness and caring in our schools.

—Martinrex Kedziora, Superintendent of Schools
Moreno Valley Unified School District
Moreno Valley, CA

This book serves as a beacon of hope. We sail forward guided by the positive momentum of these Principles and Action Steps to navigate the present challenges and prepare for those to come. Get on board for a joyful journey of deliberate optimism based on honesty, humor, and hope.

—Stephen Sroka, National Teacher Hall of Fame Inductee
Walt Disney American Teacher of the Year
Fellow of the American School Health Association and
Adjunct Assistant Professor, School of Medicine,
Case Western Reserve University
Cleveland, OH

PRAISE FOR THE FIRST EDITION

This book reminds us that we have far more control than we realize. The message of *Deliberate Optimism* reinforces my personal coping strategy of humming "Keep on the Sunny Side" when I encounter negativity and challenges!

—Deborah Kasak, Executive Director,
National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades
Reform Schools to Watch Initiative

Deliberate Optimism is for all of those teachers who got into education because of a love for children and a passion for learning. Read this book . . . and regain your optimism.

—Peter DeWitt, Independent Consultant,
Finding Common Ground by *Education Week*,
Corwin Author, and Consulting Editor for the
Corwin Connected Educators Series

Sometimes teachers forget that taking care of ourselves is an important part of the job. *Deliberate Optimism* helps educators learn how refill our mental and emotional gas tanks—or at least increase our fuel efficiency.

—Roxanna Elden, Author, *See Me After Class:*
Advice for Teachers by Teachers

Every district leader and building principal should put this book in the hands of teachers and teacher assistants—and then model the kind of deliberate optimism teachers have a right to expect from their leaders.

—Ron Nash, Presenter and Author of
The Active Classroom series

This book is a must-have resource. Easy to read and implement, it offers a wealth of sensible, realistic, and inspiring advice about how to successfully manage the daily business of being a classroom teacher. Its positive message is simply empowering!

—Julia G. Thompson, Author, *The First-Year*
Teacher's Survival Guide

Not only is the book a singular call to arms for teachers to reclaim their joy, but within these pages are real strategies for healing our souls and growing positive, nurturing classrooms.

—Kevin Honeycutt, International Speaker, Author,
Song Writer, and Program Developer, Educational Services and
Staff Development Association of Central Kansas

This book provides a framework for taking responsibility in classrooms, choosing to see the positives, dealing with problems rather than dwelling on them, recognizing that choices are always available, and building relationships with all in the school community.

—Charla Buford Bunker, Literacy Specialist
Great Falls High School, MT

deliberate OPTIMISM

2ND EDITION

This book is dedicated to our families and friends
who support us unconditionally and to our fellow educators
who still believe that what they do matters.

DEBBIE SILVER • JACK C. BERCKEMEYER

deliberate OPTIMISM 2ND EDITION

STILL RECLAIMING THE JOY IN EDUCATION

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FOR INFORMATION:

Corwin
A SAGE Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(800) 233-9936
www.corwin.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
Unit No 323-333, Third Floor, F-Block
International Trade Tower Nehru Place
New Delhi 110 019

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
18 Cross Street #10-10/11/12
China Square Central
Singapore 048423

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023935912

President: Mike Soules
Vice President and Editorial Director: Monica Eckman
Senior Acquisitions Editor: Tanya Ghans
Content Development Manager: Desirée A. Bartlett
Editorial Assistant: Nyle De Leon
Production Editor: Amy Schroller
Copy Editor: Karin Rathert
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
Cover Designer: Rose Storey
Marketing Manager: Morgan Fox

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

CONTENTS

PREFACE

Your profession is not what brings home your weekly paycheck, your profession is what you're put here on earth to do, with such passion and such intensity that it becomes spiritual in calling.

—Vincent van Gogh

In 2015, we (Debbie and Jack), along with our friend and colleague, Judith Baenen, published *Deliberate Optimism: Reclaiming the Joy in Education* in response to our work with teachers and leaders who reported a distressing decline in their feelings of work-related status and power. A general sensation of helplessness and futility seemed to be growing among educators as the public perception of schools reached new lows. The escalating focus on standardized curriculums and assessments, increasingly overbearing teacher evaluations, growing breakdown in parental support, and other factors gave rise to a lost sense of enthusiasm for and joy in working in education.

Our purpose was to write a book that discussed the existing challenges facing educators and provide reasonable, effective ways to restore efficacy to all the adults who act as advocates for students in schools. We added humor because, well, that's just who we are. After the book's publication, we traveled the country and abroad helping teachers and leaders rethink how to empower themselves and reclaim their optimism, even during challenging

circumstances. We felt we were successful in assisting fellow educators reduce rising anxiety by laughing more and learning not to fret over circumstances beyond their control.

Then March 2020 brought on more challenges than any of us could have anticipated. The exigent burdens on school systems and individuals beginning with the first shelter-in-place orders through the present have driven teacher job satisfaction to an all-time low.

Unfortunately, the added strain generated by the pandemic, divisive political and cultural debates, and even greater distrust from parents triggered many in education to question their *calling*. Education already had attrition problems before the pandemic, and now the resultant toxic levels of stress have teachers leaving the profession in numbers never seen before.

Despite the growing unrest and increasing anxiety levels, we (the authors) are adamant about buoying current educators and encouraging positive, effective people to join the ranks of those of us who still believe we can make significant differences for learners. We maintain that teaching remains the most noble profession. What other group of people has more ability to shape the future by empowering the next generation to think, to create, and to act compassionately toward their fellow humans?

We do not mean to imply that there are no longer "pockets of excellence" across the nation where both students and teachers embrace their learning institutions as places that are safe, engaging, and generally happy. All of us can point to schools that offer the best kinds of learning environments for students and are appreciated by the adults who work there as well as the communities they serve. We hope that every school is working to grow toward that kind of quality.

Because exemplary schools are not universal, however, there are policy makers, community members, administrators, parents, and even teachers who have allowed themselves to get caught in the *blame game* in which pointing fingers gets priority over working on solutions. And because most of the pointed fingers of late have been directed at classrooms, some teachers quite understandably have taken a defensive posture as well as defeatist attitude. This negativity helps no one, and as we like to say, "We are done with that!"

Together Debbie and Jack decided to revise this book to include even more information about how we as educators can take back our power, our joy, and our optimism. For every teacher, the journey to this profession is a complex and unique road. We believe the

incredible adventure of teaching is indeed a calling, and it requires ongoing purpose and effort to sustain its viability. We authors grew up in different parts of the country, taught in vastly diverse school settings, and we each have our own areas of expertise. Nonetheless, we have been friends and colleagues for almost three decades, and we share a common belief that a sense of humor, an awareness of personal responsibility, a commitment to purpose, and a feeling of realistic optimism are the keys to sustained fulfillment in this profession.

You won't find suggestions that promote what many are calling "toxic positivity" in these pages. We know first-hand that educators are worn out and overwhelmed. Some are uncertain about their effectiveness as they question their purpose. And amid the self-doubt and anxiety about the state of education, they have been bombarded with admonitions to silence their negative emotions, deny their anguish, and at least pretend that everything is okay.

Deliberate Optimism, Second Edition: Still Reclaiming the Joy in Education provides an updated look at how now more than ever teachers and leaders must acknowledge and seek to resolve the unsustainable stress levels on all those connected with schooling. It provides a realistic view of how individuals and teams can empower themselves and each other to create solutions that restore teacher autonomy, competence, and relevance, thus reigniting a sense of hope and purpose in our profession.

The Revised Principles of Deliberate Optimism for Educators

We think there are some concrete practical steps that will help leaders and teachers remain hopeful no matter what the adversity. Influenced by the works of some of the world's greatest optimists, Dale Carnegie, Norman Vincent Peale, Martin Seligman, Stephen Covey, and others, we originally developed five principles for deliberate optimism. With the input of educators across the country, particularly Urbandale Community School District in Iowa, we have revised what are now our *Four Principles for Deliberate Optimism for Educators.* We use these throughout this book to guide the discussion about how teachers, administrators, and other staff can intentionally and effectively become realistic optimists.

Four Principles for Deliberate Optimism for Educators

1. Gather information.
2. Control what you can.
3. Do something positive.
4. Own your part.

Each chapter covers a different aspect of maintaining optimism in an educational setting. Through research-based strategies, practical examples, action steps, and thought-provoking scenarios, the authors provide food for thought along with enough humor to make the journey fun. General Discussion Questions and Action Steps for Leaders follow each chapter, and an appendix of further activities is provided at the end of the book.

ESSENTIALS FOR HAPPINESS

- Something to love
- Something to do
- Something to hope for

—Author unknown

Introduction—*Choosing to Enter Education Is a Telling Vote for Optimism*—discusses the meaning of optimism and its component parts (joy, positivity, happiness, hope) and why it is an essential element in education. The dangers of "toxic positivity" are compared to the benefits of realistic optimism.

Chapter 1—*Principle #1: Gather Information*—encourages educators to find authentic answers by going as directly to the source as possible. Suggestions are provided about how to filter our perception of the motives of others.

Chapter 2—*Principle #2: Control What You Can*—explores how self-efficacy is enhanced by determining what we can control and by focusing our efforts on the controllable elements in our lives. Through "disputation theory" and "reframing," we can feel more energized and negate being debilitated by feelings of helplessness.

Chapter 3—*Principle #3: Do Something Positive*—points out ways that action can rejuvenate us as it creates helpful momentum. Proactive action steps for maintaining one's health give educators specific strategies for building personal resiliency.

Chapter 4—*Principle #4: Own Your Part*—explores the idea of educators "taking back our power" through collegial feedback and support. Practical steps for promoting "radical responsibility" among staff members are examined.

Chapter 5—*Mental Health Is Health*—argues that without mental health, there can be no real health. This chapter offers several positive ideas for meeting the mental health needs of the adults at school as well as providing steps individuals can take on their own.

Chapter 6—"*But We Have This* ONE *Teacher Who Keeps Ruining Everything!*"—examines extrovert/introvert tendencies and generational differences to help better understand ourselves and how we can interact more positively with colleagues. It also offers tips on minimizing the effect of negative associates as well as bullies.

Chapter 7—*Building a Positive Shared School Community*—focuses on intentionally building supportive relationships among leaders, staff, and students. Specific social-emotional learning activities geared at enhancing trust and cooperation are described and discussed.

Chapter 8—*Joyful School Communities—The Sum of Their Parts*—looks at what teachers, leaders, parents/caretakers, and local communities can do to help restore optimism and hope in our nation's schools. Ideas and activities for building camaraderie throughout the community are provided.

What's New in This Edition

- Additional focus on leadership for both teachers and administrators
- Updated information and suggestions addressing major changes in education since the 2015 first edition
- Revised, succinct Principles of Optimism
- Chapters revised to include a designated chapter for each Principle of Optimism
- Interactive "Action Step" exercises for the reader in each chapter
- Updated research and examples
- QR codes in every chapter for additional resources
- Added chapter on mental health
- More General Discussion Questions and Action Steps for School Leaders at the end of each chapter

This Book Will Help You . . .

- Be able to employ purposeful, intentional strategies to maintain a sense of optimism about your work
- Understand the importance of maintaining one's sense of self as well as one's health
- Receive valuable insights on dealing with differing and/or difficult people in the profession
- Obtain valuable ideas for fostering positive school relationships
- Evaluate how to positively interact with those outside the school setting to build a shared community

To sum it up, teachers are expected to cheerfully address standards-based instruction (SBI) and other Common Core curriculum (CC) with appropriate response to intervention (RTI) techniques while including problem-based learning (PBL) and end-of-course-assessment (EOC). They should use positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS) to ensure student engagement and create behavior intervention plans (BIPs) for students who don't wish to comply. They must learn to separate student data gleaned from standardized tests that comply with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) and discuss the results in their professional learning communities (PLCs) as part of their ongoing professional development (PD). At the same time, they are expected to design plans for differentiated instruction (DI) utilizing each child's multiple intelligences (MI) while writing individual education programs (IEPs) for students who need additional support. All this must be done with an eye toward a gradual release of responsibility (GRR) so that no child is left behind (NCLB). (Perhaps not ironically, we are witnessing the current trend of *Rising Exasperation Towards Impractical, Restrictive Edicts* [RETIRE]).

Seriously, we are concerned with new surveys indicating as many as 44 percent of current teachers will leave the profession in the next two years (Merrimack College, 2022), and 42 percent of principals across the country reported the pandemic has accelerated their plans to leave the profession (Levin et al., 2020). Educators now lead the latest *Gallup Panel Workforce Study* reporting the highest burnout rate (52%) among all U.S. workers (Marken & Agrawal, 2022). Nevertheless, we believe there are many steps leaders and educators can take to alleviate some of the basic annoyances as well as the overt and covert challenges educators face daily.

In *Deliberate Optimism, Second Edition: Still Trying to Reclaim the Joy in Education*, we endeavor to help school leaders and their teachers regain a sense power and influence. We believe that a

candid examination of how we educators are sometimes our own worst enemy will help us as a group to stop shooting ourselves in the foot and start speaking in a collective voice that will be heard. We want our profession to regain its moral calling and educators to reclaim their joy in doing their jobs.

We respectfully (and sometimes tongue-in-cheek) submit our ideas for our brothers and sisters in the *educationnation.*

Debbie Silver

Jack Berckemeyer

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to my friend and colleague Jack Berckemeyer and my friend and former collaborator on the first edition of the book Judith Baenen. You two continue to inspire me with you unwavering support of kids, of middle-level education, and of me. I know my life if better because you are in it.

—Debbie Silver

A special thanks to my friends and "partners in crime," Debbie Silver and Judith Baenen. Thanks also to Lawrence Silver for his patience as Debbie worked long hours on our book. Together we help each other find our own *deliberate optimism.*

—Jack Berckemeyer

We are most appreciative of the support we have had from Corwin, particularly, Desirée Bartlett, Tanya Ghans, Karin Rathert, and Nyle DeLeon. You made this revision possible and the journey a lot easier.

—Debbie and Jack

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Debbie Silver is a humorist, consultant, and retired educator with over thirty years of experience as a classroom teacher, staff development facilitator, and university professor. As a classroom teacher, Dr. Silver won numerous awards, including the *1990 Louisiana Teacher of the Year* award. She speaks worldwide on issues involving education and is a passionate advocate for students and teachers.

Debbie wrote the best-selling books *Drumming to the Beat of Different Marchers* and *Fall Down 7 Times, Get Up 8*. She co-wrote the best-selling *Teaching Kids to Thrive*. In 1990, Debbie Pace and Lawrence Silver merged their families of three boys (Debbie) and two boys (Lawrence) as they married and eventually both earned their doctorate degrees (to form a "pair-a-docs"). They currently reside in Melissa, Texas.

One of the nation's most popular keynote speakers and professional development presenters, Debbie has given presentations

around the world (including 49 states [Hey, Delaware, let's talk!], Canada, Mexico, Europe, the Middle East, Australia, Africa, and Asia), helping audiences to interact with students on a more meaningful level.

While inspiring educators to enjoy the job they once loved, she reminds them of how important they are in the lives of children, their families, and the world. Through her writing and her speaking, she makes essential points while sharing poignant stories and lots of laughs.

Jack Berckemeyer is a nationally recognized presenter, author, and humorist, Jack Berckemeyer began his career as a middle school teacher in Denver, Colorado. After only two years, he was recognized as the outstanding educator at his school and in his district. Then in 2003, Jack received the Outstanding Alumni Award from the Falcon School District. Jack has also served as a judge for the Disney American Teacher Awards and has served on the selection committee for the USA TODAY All-Teacher Team. Jack has a master's degree in middle level education as well as an administrator's degree.

For 13 years, Jack served as the assistant executive director for the National Middle School Association. He is the owner of Berckemeyer Consulting Group, where he has presented in hundreds of school districts and conference settings both nationally and internationally.

Jack is known not only for his keynotes and workshops but is also highly regarded as one of the best long-term professional developers in the country. Jack is best-practice focused and research based. He is in high demand and enjoys working with districts that truly want to see measurable changes. As the owner and director of *NUTS and BOLTS—The **N**ever **B**oring Conference for Educators,* Jack brings conferences for educators to a whole new level of engagement by focusing on best practices and offering realistic and practical hands-on tools to increase success for educators, schools, and students.

He is the author of *Managing the Madness: A Practical Guide to Middle Grades Classrooms; Taming of the Team: How Great Teams Work Together; How to Do Virtual Teaching Even If You Have a Face for Radio;* and numerous educational articles. In addition, he is the lead author of the comprehensive professional development curriculum: *Elements of Effective Teaming*. Jack has also co-authored *Deliberate Optimism: Reclaiming the Joy in Education* (with Debbie Silver and Judith Baenen); *The What, Why, and How of Student-Led Conferences* (with Patti Kinney), and *H.E.L.P. for Teachers* (with Judith Baenen). His latest book, *Successful Middle School Teaming*, was released fall of 2022 and is the companion guide to *The Successful Middle School: This We Believe.*

Jack lives in Denver, Colorado, and has no pets or plants.

INTRODUCTION

CHOOSING TO ENTER EDUCATION IS A TELLING VOTE FOR OPTIMISM

Optimism is the foundation of all good teaching. Optimism in the face of daunting reality is downright heroic—and that, in fact, is what good teachers practice all day long while others denigrate their contributions to society.

—Rafe Esquith

Who Chooses Education as a Profession?

There are probably as many paths to teaching as there are teachers. Maybe you always knew you were going to be a teacher. As a child, you spent hours in your room preparing lessons and delivering them to captive younger siblings or to Max, the aging family dog. You loved dry erase boards, markers, and stickers. Perhaps your parents were teachers, and you quite naturally fell into the familiar profession. Or maybe early on you learned the joy of teaching another person something they did not know before.

Possibly you were the dispassionate learner who never really entered the conversations at school and could not figure out why the kids on the front row were so excited. You did just enough to get by and prayed that everyone, especially your teachers, would leave you alone. Then later in life, you decided you would like to be

the person to reach out to other outliers and to make ever learner feel a part of the school community.

And of course, some of our greatest teachers freely admit they were their own teachers' worst nightmare. (Nothing warms our hearts like watching a former troublesome student become a teacher–especially if they are assigned several students who act just like they did.) Rule-breaking-back-talking-defiant-attitude students often grow up and want to go back as teachers so they can change a system they feel failed them. Whatever the path that got us here, we joined this profession because we believed we could make this world a better place—one student at a time.

When we decided to become teachers, we entered an unbreakable pact with the future. We promised to do the best we could with what we had and what we knew to successfully mold the next generation. As educators, we know that it is our obligation to grow, to learn, and to reflect on how to improve ourselves every year so that we leave the future of this world in the best, most capable, most educated hands imaginable. If we don't subscribe to this noble purpose, then what are we doing in education?

Why Is Optimism So Important for Educators?

When we (the authors) write about optimism, we do not intend to imply that teachers should show up every day with fake grins pasted on their faces. Nor are we talking about educators doing cartwheels of joy down the hall to face an angry parent in the office, dancing gleefully into a required professional development meeting on blood-borne pathogens, or squealing with delight when given the task of disaggregating student data from the latest high sweepstakes test results. Just as with any job or profession, we all have duties that are less than pleasant. Our intent is to examine realistic, purposeful strategies teachers and school leaders can employ to restore their hope in a system they feel is rapidly heading off course.

We realize the challenges of teaching today are greater than they have ever been before. Schools have become a political minefield of mandated policies and procedures that censure original thinking and creative innovation. Schools are experiencing both academic and emotional deficits. Staff shortages are widespread while those who are there must deal with the pain of families who suffered trauma and fallout from the COVID pandemic. In the court of social media, schools are suffering the downward slide of public opinion. Grace, patience, trust, gratitude, and empathy seem to be in short supply among both school employees and student

families. As NASSP's 2015 principal of the year writes, "We are not okay" (Meade, 2022).

Action Step I.1

FIND YOUR BASELINE OPTIMISM SCORE

Before you get started, you may want to get a baseline score on your overall optimism ranking on the *Los Angeles Times* **Optimism Test,** which you can access by scanning QR Code I.1. Did the results surprise you or confirm what you already knew? See also Appendix I.2. You can also explore your current life orientation toward optimism with the short test in Appendix I.1.

What Is Optimism?

Is *optimism* a product of nature or nurture? We believe that one's disposition may be influenced by nature, but a state of optimism can be developed and maintained by anyone who chooses to frame their perceptions in a manner that is both realistic and positive.

There are those who believe that people are either born with optimistic tendencies or they are not. Some people are told, "You have always been a happy person. Even as a baby, you were such a cheerful little thing." Or a person might overhear a parent say, "He was a cranky, finicky infant, and he hasn't changed a bit. It's like living with Oscar the Grouch. He could find a way to depress Tony Robbins." Perhaps you know a student or an adult whose natural facial expression is a frown. Maybe you attribute this negative persona to something within the person that cannot be changed. We do not agree. There is a reason we like to use the term *deliberate optimism*. We believe optimism can be learned, developed, and maintained. We do acknowledge that some people seem to be more outwardly cheerful than others, but we strongly argue that anyone can deliberately change their attitude.

Optimism is sometimes used synonymously with *hopefulness, joy, happiness*, and *positivity*. We want to clarify that what we are encouraging is called *realistic optimism*, which encompasses each of these terms listed. A single-minded optimist in a Jurassic Park movie might say, "Yeah, I knew those dinosaurs wouldn't get me. I never doubted I'd get out alive. I just live a charmed life." A realistic optimist would say, "Wow, that was a close call, and here's what I'd do differently next time . . ." Realistic optimists recognize the negative, work to fix the fixable (accepting, coping with, or deemphasizing the unfixable), and intentionally focus their attention and energy on solutions.

In the broadest sense, optimism generally refers to looking on the bright side of virtually everything (i.e., "Yes, the pandemic was challenging, but think how it is going to help us improve education. It's really been a blessing in disguise."). On the other hand, *pessimism* generally refers to assuming the worst possible outcome about everything (i.e., "The pandemic was the tipping point of the collapse of public education. It's all going to be downhill from here. Count me out."). Seldom is anyone totally optimistic or pessimistic, and even optimism needs some parameters.

We are not asking educators to be dogged optimists. An unequivocal optimist may have a totally unrealistic hope for a better outcome. The attitude of "I'm just going to trust the universe" could negate any requirement for personal action or responsibility. Possible pitfalls can be overlooked as well as missing opportunities for change and growth. Studies have shown that too much optimism can lead to disappointment and loss of hope.

The Stockdale Paradox

Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great,* describes a negative consequence of blind optimism. He writes about a powerful psychological duality of maintaining unwavering faith in the endgame while accepting brutal facts. He calls this the *Stockdale Paradox*.

> The name refers to Admiral Jim Stockdale, who was the highest-ranking United States military officer in the "Hanoi Hilton" prisoner-of-war camp during the height of the Vietnam War. Tortured over twenty times during his eight-year imprisonment from 1965 to 1973, Stockdale lived out the war without any prisoner's rights, no set release date, and no certainty as to whether he would even survive to see his family again.
>
> . . . . . .
> . . . . . .
>
> As I [Jim Collins] moved through the book [*In Love and War,* written by Stockdale and his wife], I found myself getting depressed. It just seemed so bleak—the uncertainty of his fate, the brutality of his captors, and so forth. And then, it dawned on me: "Here I am sitting in my warm and comfortable office, looking out over the beautiful Stanford campus on a beautiful Saturday afternoon. I'm getting depressed reading this, and I know the end of the story! I know that he gets out, reunites

with his family, becomes a national hero, and gets to spend the later years of his life studying philosophy on this same beautiful campus. If it feels depressing for me, how on earth did he deal with it when he was actually there and *did not know the end of the story*?"

"I never lost faith in the end of the story," he said, when I asked him. "I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade."

I didn't say anything for many minutes, and we continued the slow walk toward the faculty club, Stockdale limping and arc-swinging his stiff leg that had never fully recovered from repeated torture. Finally, after about a hundred meters of silence, I asked, "Who didn't make it out?"

"Oh, that's easy," he said. "The optimists."

"The optimists? I don't understand," I said, now completely confused, given what he'd said a hundred meters earlier.

"The optimists. Oh, they were the ones who said, 'We're going to be out by Christmas.' And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they'd say, 'We're going to be out by Easter.' And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart."

Another long pause, and more walking. Then he turned to me and said, "This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be."

To this day, I carry a mental image of Stockdale admonishing the optimists: "We're not getting out by Christmas; deal with it!" (Collins, 2001, pp. 83–85)

We educators do not yet know the end of our story either. We must focus on what's currently working in our situations and take what steps we can take to make things better. We can't afford to ignore problems or presume that fate will always turn in our favor. We need to prepare ourselves to face the tough situations we now have and form a plan of action not only to cope with but to thrive in these difficult times. There are problems in education; let's deal with them!

I am fundamentally an optimist. Whether that comes from nature or nurture, I cannot say. Part of being optimistic is keeping one's head pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lays defeat and death.

—Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*

Optimism and Hope

Obviously, while Admiral Stockdale prepared for the worst, he never gave up hope. Part of realistic optimism requires that we educators continue to believe that our schools can work and what we do improves the lives of children. *Hope* is the belief that our future can be better than our past and that we have a role to play in making that future a reality. Just as we think hope is giving every learner a *reasonable* chance at success, we believe teachers and leaders deserve a system that provides them a sufficient chance to be successful. We explore this concept further in later chapters.

Upon the retirement of thirty-five-year veteran kindergarten teacher Lil Lufkin, her head of school at Calhoun School in Manhattan, Nelson (2013), wrote the following tribute letter:

Dear Lil,

Thirty-five years, 15 kids—give or take—to a class. That makes 525 kids you have loved and taught. You've spent about 50,400 hours teaching during those 35 years. That's enough time to visit Pluto and return, yet you have stayed in one place. Remarkable.

During this, your final year of teaching, rock stars have been idolized, athletes have signed multi-million-dollar contracts before they are old enough to vote, and business leaders have been convicted because of shabby ethics and practices. They have been in the New York Times *and you have not. You have stayed in one place, teaching children while controversy swirled over the war in Vietnam, while the Hubble Telescope captured breathtaking pictures of the infant universe, and while the Dow Jones Industrial average went from 750 to 12,000. You have stayed in one place, teaching children, while Elvis died and reappeared in small towns everywhere, while the Berlin Wall fell, and while the nation enjoyed unprecedented prosperity and endured unspeakable terror.*

A lot happened while you were just sitting around in one place teaching children!

There is no profession as important as teaching children and you have done it with rare grace, skill, good humor, and abundant love. You should be the Times Magazine *Woman of the Year. You should win multiple Oscars, Tonys, and Emmys. You should be awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Niceness and the Nobel Prize for Dedication. But you won't. Teachers don't become household names unless they do something really awful and all you have done are really wonderful things.*

Yes, you have taught long enough to visit Pluto and return, yet you have stayed in one place. Some people travel to far galaxies and other people prepare them for the trip. For 35 years you have been Calhoun's NASA. You have inspired and cajoled, taught and hugged. You have given your hundreds of kids a confident and unconditionally affirming start and sewn their flight jackets with threads of wisdom and joy. You've laughed at their 5-year-old jokes and been gob-smacked by their insights. You've wiped their noses (and behinds) and put smiles back on their faces just when they needed it. And because of you, 525 kids believed they could travel to the stars or accomplish anything they wished. And they have. And they will.

There can be no life achievement greater than to have affected the lives of 525 humans in a profound and irreversible way. In any other context this statement might be trite, but in your case, it is irrefutably true: You have changed the world for the better.

Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/steve-nelson/teaching-the-most-noble-p_b_2471894.html

Happiness and Joy

Happiness is an emotional state often dictated by circumstance. It is not, however, a state of constant euphoria. Instead, happiness is an overall sense of experiencing more positive emotions than negative ones. Being a happy person does not mean you feel happy twenty-four hours per day. That's impossible and completely unnatural. Happy people pursue a career that is fulfilling to them, they make time for their outside interests, and they connect deeply with the people they care about.

Joy is more like a deep, strongly held conviction that is ever-present and unshakeable. *Merriam Webster*'s dictionary defines joy as "the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires." It is a state of mind and an orientation of the heart. It is a settled state of contentment, confidence, and hope. People can have joy while temporarily unhappy. ("I'm upset about the new censures on library books, but I love my role in promoting children's literacy.") And they can have fleeting happiness without joy. ("I'm happy about my pay raise, but I'm wondering if teaching is my true calling.")

When we ask that educators reclaim their joy in education, we are inviting them to revisit their purpose, their self-efficacy, and their passion. We fervently hope educators can renew their sense of satisfaction in their chosen profession as well as revitalize their profound and unflinching faith they are on the right path.

Positivity and Toxic Positivity

People often equate optimism with *positivity*, but there is a difference. Positive thinking does not necessarily mean avoiding or ignoring the bad aspects of life. Instead, it involves making the most of the potentially bad situations, trying to see the best in other people, and viewing ourselves and our abilities in a positive light. Recently, the concept of positivity has come under fire as some educators have rejected what they call *toxic positivity*.

Toxic positivity is the overgeneralization of a happy, optimistic state that results in the denial, minimization, and invalidation of the authentic human emotional experience. Teachers who protest or complain are seen as malcontents and are told simply "to be more awesome." Social media often features unstainable teaching measures—such as individual handshake greetings for every student before every class period and "spontaneous" teacher flash mob dances—as reminders to teachers that they are not doing enough to engage learners. Pinterest and Instagram post photos of picture-perfect classrooms that most teachers know wouldn't last five minutes once real students got in there. (We often caution teachers, "Pinterest is the place you want to visit when you want to feel like a total *loser*!") Joking aside, messages are everywhere telling teachers they are inadequate and are simply not doing enough.

Well-meaning school leaders who constantly push artificial positivity on staff members without allowing for any sort of venting or dissent are often using this facade to avoid talking about the heavy-hitting issues that are important but might make people feel uncomfortable (temporarily, anyway). Teachers get the message that if they are just cheerful enough or work hard enough, everything will work out. Struggling teachers faced with this superficial bromide can be left feeling disconnected, devalued, and desolate.

> In schools, toxic positivity may look like administrators urging teachers to take time for "self-care," but then loading them down with extra meetings and responsibilities. It may look like someone hanging a "teacher strong" banner in the hallway, but not paying for enough soap in the bathroom. It may look like conversations that encourage teachers to

> "stay positive," while not digging deeper into the issues that really matter, whether it's a pandemic, equity, or school culture. (Mason, 2021)

Toxic positivity is used to mask deeper, challenging feelings with artificial happiness and contrived merriment. The everything-is-fine mantra can be used to coerce conformity and exert control. Genuine positivity includes compassion, empathy, patience, and grace. It says to coworkers, "We may not be in the same boat, but we are in this storm together."

Positive thinking is about taking a proactive approach to our lives. Instead of feeling hopeless or overwhelmed, positive thinking allows us to tackle life's challenges by looking for effective ways to resolve conflict and come up with creative solutions to problems. Positivity is a prerequisite to both optimism and joy.

Action Step I.2

WHAT IS TOXIC POSITIVITY?

Scan QR Code I.2 to watch the 7-minute TedTalk, *Every Kid Needs a Champion* by Rita Pierson. Some teachers have claimed that administrators who show this video to their staff are promoting toxic positivity. What do you think they are talking about? Do you agree? Why or why not?

How Do We Stay Positive?

In our classrooms, we now have students on medication, students who *need* to be on medication, students who don't speak our language, students who sleep in cars at night, students who don't get to be kids when they go home from school, and students who would rather be anywhere else than at school. We have kids who have lost loved ones because of the pandemic, gun violence, and deportation, and we have kids who endure more heartache in a month than many of us will have to confront in a lifetime. And sometimes, we also teach kids who will never have to work a day in their lives and are already acting like it.

Some educators believe that it is getting harder and harder to make the best of their tough situations. Well-known educator/author Rafe Esquith writes about a teacher he sees frowning one Friday afternoon. When he asks her why she is grumpy on a Friday of all days, she replies, "It just means Monday is that much closer." He concedes that being optimistic is sometimes difficult:

> A teacher works hard all day, comes home, and reads an article blaming him or her for the failure of students to do well on tests or behave appropriately. I don't know the exact moment when teachers became the scapegoat for factors beyond their control, but the moment has come. And the unfair, often ridiculous expectations being placed on teachers explain why some of them can't even be happy about an upcoming weekend of family and fun, knowing that Monday looms. (Esquith, 2014, p. 20)

Though we don't dispute Mr. Esquith's point about the pessimistic perceptions and unreasonable expectations teachers often face, we think that too often individuals allow their negative reactions to work circumstances override the otherwise positive aspects of their lives. Teachers have control over more than they realize. After all, we can always determine how we will react to situations. Changing our thought patterns is not easy, but it is a highly effective way to navigate the rough waters of our profession. As Lao Tzu once said, "Thoughts lead to actions, actions lead to habits, habits lead to character, and character changes destiny." So let's talk about changing thoughts.

It's Time to Stop Fretting

In a recent article, *Back to School—Level 8 of Jumanji?* Debbie Silver offers three tips for regaining the joy in teaching in the upcoming school year. She starts by asking educators to stop fretting.

> Fretting is a high state of agitation or anxiety over past events or anticipated problems over which one has no control. It can be observed anytime you witness teachers having the "Ain't it awful" conversation. There are legitimate problems in schools right now. Time spent agonizing over events or decisions beyond our control breaks down our resilience and depletes our resourcefulness.
>
> It is possible to acknowledge there are problems while remaining hopeful and confident we can make things better. We can work to fix the fixable and deemphasize the unfixable by coping with it or deemphasizing it. When we intentionally focus our attention and energy on solutions rather than on complaining, we are far more likely to get the results we want or at least make the problems less formidable.
>
> The media would have us believe that our schools are facing insurmountable struggles. We cannot allow

ourselves to buy into that line of thought. True, we have lots of work to do, but who can handle it better than this nation's teachers? This year do whatever you need to do to stop fretting—turn off or limit your time with the media, whiners, and colleagues who see themselves as victims. (Silver, 2022)

Let's Take Back Our Power

Teachers need to see ourselves as visionaries, not victims. Most of us have a lot more power than we realize. Think about the students whose lives have been enriched because of you. Consider the times you thought you couldn't cope with some of the challenges in your job, but you did. To maintain our optimism and our self-efficacy, it is essential that we regularly reflect on our areas of achievement and growth.

We need to stretch ourselves and try new things. We should value and acknowledge our valiant efforts. Nothing is more empowering than hard-earned success. We must give ourselves credit for even incremental achievements ("Today, I didn't flip out when that condescending parent asked me if I had even been to college.").

Everyone needs to pay attention to the successes (even the small ones) of those around us. In our community, we can make it a priority to speak well of our school and the people in it. When people ask us what we do, we should proclaim, "I am a teacher!" (or whatever job title you have) with the same gusto Frasier Crane uses when he tells people, "I went to Harvard!" It is an honor to be a part of this profession; let's act like it.

Self-Determination

As experienced teachers, we must admit that each of us has spent some time in the *ain't it awful* place. You know the situation; a bunch of educators gather to collectively bemoan the obstacles that keep us from doing a great job as teachers. It generally starts with someone shaking their head and saying things like, "Well, the principal just informed me that I must cover all my bulletin boards during standardized test week. There's not one thing on those boards that will influence a student's answers, but he says it's a rule that every teacher will cover all informational material on bulletin boards and classroom walls. That is such a waste of time! There is no reason to burden us with such a stupid mandate." The surrounding group members shake their heads in misery as they do the familiar *ain't it awful* routine. No one offers a possible

explanation, a plan, or a solution to the challenge. Participants simply hang their heads and say, "Look what **They** are doing to **Us** now. Ain't it Awful?"

Us and **They** are two powerful words that can diminish the optimism within a school. For example, a teacher sends a student to the office and is unhappy about the results. She tells her coworkers, "I sent Draco to the office, and **They** did nothing! I guess the *powers that be* don't care one bit about **Us** and what **We** are having to put up with in our classrooms." Using the term, **They,** in this context is divisive and pits the teachers against those in administration. Laying blame without even trying to find out the facts or seeing the perspective of the other person contributes to an erosion of trust and cooperation among the adults at school. We teachers need to focus more on what we can control rather than trying to micromanage what we perceive others should be doing.

Another problem with the "Look what **They** are doing to **Us"** mentality is that it robs us of power. It suggests that we are helpless against forces that at best do not care about us and at worst are out to get us. Edward Deci and Richard Ryan, University of Rochester, have spent years investigating the general theory of motivation. Their work has influenced over four decades of research on the influence of certain factors supporting the individual's natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and productive ways. They and others conclude that increasing an individual's autonomy, competency, and relatedness has a positive effect on their *self-determination (SDT)*. And it is self-determination that regulates internalizing and maintaining positive behaviors.

Autonomy

We support the notion that if teachers are connecting with students in a positive way and their students are learning the mandated essential ideas, they (the teachers) should be supported and encouraged to add their own personal styles to the way they teach. This kind of professional freedom is a sure way to boost morale and maintain a more optimistic climate in schools.

We hear from teachers about their increasing feelings of helplessness. Top-down decisions are affecting their freedom to choose the way they teach, the pace at which they teach, and their individuality as educators (some can't even pick their own library books for their rooms).

Along with our current large-scale testing comes large-scale prep and remediation programs (often from the same companies—hmmmm), which prescribe the exact methods and allocated time for instruction. Some of their materials go so far as to script the curriculum to make their lessons *teacher proof*. Perhaps a beginning teacher would welcome a few scripted lessons to practice their new skills for a short while, but for the most part, teachers feel insulted by admonitions to "stick to the script" rather than to creatively address the learning goals with their best practices and based on their knowledge of the students in their classrooms.

After telling teachers for decades to look for teachable moments and to do everything we can to personalize lessons to our students' interests, there is now a push to standardize most every aspect of the classroom experience. Stanford University Education Professor Noddings (2014) writes, "Freedom to plan and teach creatively is conducive to both higher morale and a deeper sense of responsibility" (p. 18).

In her book *Where Teachers Thrive*, Susan M. Johnson pleads for teachers to be given more autonomy and authority in their schools:

> If schools are to become the engine of change that public education needs, then their educators must have sufficient autonomy as a group to make key decisions about staffing, budgeting, curriculum, and the schedule. Whereas school districts have long controlled such matters, school[s] will inevitably be limited in what they can achieve if they are needlessly bound by uniform regulations and expectations. . . . We need a "guided autonomy'" in our schools. (Johnson, 2019, p. 248)

One of the things that attracts educators to the profession is the fundamental understanding that we will be able to make decisions about what goes on in our classrooms. Whether we have long dreamed of replicating our own happy classroom experiences or whether we want to try something entirely different from what we perceived as ineffective when we were in school, we did not aspire to become automatons who merely recite programmed directions and administer summative tests. We believe that teachers should be trusted to communicate essential ideas and to connect with our students in ways we deem most effective. When students are not mastering the knowledge and skills they need or are alienated by a teacher's attitude, corrective action can be taken through peer and/or administrative intervention. Feeling trusted encourages optimism.

There is an old story about a veteran maintenance person who was transferred to a new school. The principal proudly showed him around the campus, instructing him on how he wanted it maintained. In the teacher workroom, the principal made a show of unlocking a large storeroom filled with paper, pencils, and all kinds of supplies and materials a teacher might need to use in her classroom. The principal told the custodian he would be in charge of restocking and maintaining the closet, but that he was to keep it locked at all other times. "We have to keep it secure because we can't trust our teachers with these school supplies."

The old custodian shook his head and asked quietly, "But you trust them with the kids?"

Action Step I.3

TAKE THE HAPPINESS TEST

How do you define optimism? On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being Eeyore and 10 being Pollyanna), where would you put yourself as an optimist?

Scan QR Code I.3 to access the *Psychology Today* Happiness Test. Upon Completion, you will receive a FREE snapshot report with a summary evaluation and graph. You will have the option to purchase the full results, but you don't have to.

Do you agree with the results? Why or why not? (See also Appendix I.2)

●●● DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTION STEPS

1. How do you feel about Jim Collins's mental image of Admiral Stockdale saying to some of his co-prisoners, "We're not getting out by Christmas; deal with it!" How could that apply to present school challenges?
2. Think back on all the factors that influenced you to become a teacher. Describe both the positive and negative forces that influenced you as you moved toward the job you have now. With your colleagues, try the Appendix I.3 *Life on a Roll* activity.
3. Describe the most optimistic teacher you ever had or presently know. List the qualities about that person that led you to believe they have a positive view of life. What distinguishes that person from other teachers? How did (do) you feel when you were (are) around them?
4. List the factors you think presently deter educators from feeling optimistic. Has your optimism suffered a hit recently? Why or why not?

5. Make a plan to stop *doomscrolling*. Fill your social-media feeds with people and organizations making a positive impact. But be leery of toxic positivity sites that spout platitudes with no substance.

6. Describe the amount of autonomy you feel you have in your classroom. How does that affect how you do your job? What could you do to increase your autonomy?

7. List ten things that cost little or nothing that could be put into place at your school right now that would positively impact teacher morale. Designate two or three group members to share these with your school leaders.

8. Starting now, what are some steps you could take to become a more optimistic educator? What is preventing you from doing that?

9. Make a pact with a colleague or a loved one to text each other at the end of every day with a short list of your best moments in the last twenty-four hours.

Action Steps for School Leaders

1. In the lounge or other central location, put up a Morale Graffiti Board. Encourage staff member to write or draw ideas for improving morale among the adults at school (A suggestion box can work, too.).

2. On a weekly form or in personal conversation, ask some of the following questions of your staff (from *If You Don't Feed the Teachers, They Eat the Students: Guide to Success for Administrators and Teachers* by Connors [2000, p. 22]):

   - How was your week?
   - What are some successes you experienced this week?
   - Did you have any problems this week that the administration team can assist you with?
   - Are than any concerns you have about the overall operation of the school?
   - Do you have any suggestions for improving the school?
   - Do you have any suggestions for the administrative team to improve relationships and strive to achieve our mission?

3. At ball games or at other extracurricular activities, make an announcement asking teachers and staff to stand and be recognized. Let others know about their added efforts to support the students.

(Continued)

(Continued)

4. Write occasional notes to staff members telling them what you value in them and thanking them for how they contribute to the positive morale at your school.
5. Have random drawings throughout the year for staff members that include things like gift cards, weekend get-a-ways, or a half-day sub.
6. If you have young staff members, be mindful of the demands of new parenthood. As much as possible, provide new parents with temporary relief from evening duties, time, a private place for nursing mothers to pump, and occasional late arrival and early departure privileges, if needed. Find someone to fill in for them or volunteer to cover the class yourself.
7. For staff members who are caretakers for aging parents or sick family members, offer occasional late arrival and early departure privileges as well as occasional relief from after school and evening duties. Just knowing that you are aware and supportive goes a long way.
8. Within reason (and always with an eye to safety), let teachers have as much freedom as you can in setting up their classrooms. Painting walls, moving furniture, and decorating to taste gives teachers a sense of autonomy as well as a place to call their own. Their style may not be your style, but uniformity is usually not joyful.
9. Make sure that all staff members have the supplies they need to do their jobs. Stock storerooms (or better yet, individual classrooms) with plenty of tissues, hand sanitizer, paper, cleaning solution, paper towels, band-aids, markers, pens, pencils, and whatever teachers need. Don't make them justify every request.
10. At the beginning of the year, ask every staff member to write down the name of their all-time favorite nonalcoholic drink. At stressful times during the year, surprise them by hand delivering their special beverage. (You don't have to do them all on the same day, but make sure you eventually get around to everyone).

When given impossible situations with limited resources and time, in every walk of life, educators get the job done. Teachers are the most versatile and heroic workforce on the planet. Every functioning member of society owes a debt to you.

—Williams (as cited in Will, 2022), actor on *Abbot Elementary*