

Ep #461: Why Connection Comes Before Correction in Schools with Steve McMahon



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Angela Kelly: Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to episode 461.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*, a not-so-typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host, certified life coach Angela Kelly.

Hey there, Empowered Principals. I've got something to share with you. I have a brand new program called The Empowered School. We're launching on October 27th. We're taking Empowered Principals who want to lead empowered school cultures. This will be a leadership experience for intentionally cultivating an empowered school culture.

One of the things that I coach on the most is around the culture of the school. How people think, how they feel, how they behave, the words they say, the actions, their mood, their attitudes. I coach on the interactions between the humans on campus more than any other topic that we coach on. Yes we definitely teach all of the skillset. But the art of building and cultivating a healthy and vibrant culture is the skill of a highly effective Empowered Principal. I hope you will join us for The Empowered School. The registration link is in the show notes. We'll see you October 27th.

Hello, my Empowered Principals. Happy Tuesday. Welcome to the podcast. I've got a great episode for you today. I had a conversation with a new friend and colleague of mine. His name is Steve McMahon. We met very recently, had a wonderful meet and greet conversation. You'll hear all about Steve and what he offers. I moved this podcast up because one of the things that my clients and people who are reaching out to me ask about the most is how to deal with intense behaviors, whether that's from a student, most often, but also can be from adults in the room, the adults on campus, families that you work with, even perhaps district or school board members.

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When it comes to intense behaviors, principals need to know, one, how to act, two, what to do, three, how to stay calm themselves, and a system that works consistently. Steve has worked in this line of business for almost his entire life. He has an incredible backstory. You'll hear all about it on this episode, but I want to highlight something in advanced. I want you to listen to the approach that he teaches, the approach that he takes in the schools that he works with. It is about culture. It is about connection. It is about humanity.

And if there's anything that this podcast brings to the table is, I say this in the podcast as well, I don't understand how we aren't prioritizing the humanity of education, the connection required of students for students, between students and students, students and adults, and adults to adults. Enhancing the culture means enhancing connections. It's focusing on how we're feeling and how we want to feel.

So enjoy this podcast. I'm teaching a new program on the Empowered Culture dropping this week, but Steve has a very specific program that he teaches. I want you to listen to it, sign up for it, at least read his book. He has it. The links are going to be in the show notes. This is a high-power, high-impact interview. I think you will enjoy it. I think it will be extremely relevant, and you know that you have resources available to you through Steve's work with mindset management and through my work, the Empowered Principal®. Have a beautiful week. Stay empowered. Be well.

Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to today's episode. I have a very special guest. I am so excited to have this conversation, so excited, in fact, that I moved podcast episodes around so that this would drop as soon as possible. I have with me here today, Steve McMahon. He helps schools with intense behaviors.

And can anybody raise their hand? Can anybody relate to this? And when I met him, we met online, but we have a meet and greet. As you guys know,

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I meet and greet with everybody and immediately within five minutes I was like, Steve, this is a yes. We need this service in our schools right now. We need more people to know about it and talk about it. So I have Steve here with me today. Steve, welcome to *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*.

Steve McMahon: Well, thank you so much for having me. I'm really excited about this opportunity and it was such a joy meeting with you as well last week.

Angela Kelly: Yes. Yes. We had such a wonderful chat. And I was telling Steve, you know, I meet people because I value authenticity, connection, transparency. I value connection. I value people, people forward. And I don't ever want this podcast to be a stream of solicitation. I don't want it to be a commercial, you know, just one after the next. I want it to be about us as human beings here helping the human beings who are in schools.

That's what this is about. It's about the humanity of our work. It's about human development. It's about leading actual human beings. And so Steve and I really connected deeply on that level and that's why I do the meet and greets because I want to know who's the real deal out there and Steve is one of those guys. So Steve, can you tell us a little bit about...

Steve McMahon: Thank you.

Angela Kelly: Oh, you're so welcome. I'm so delighted. Can you tell us a little bit about your background? Just let people come up to speed with who you are, what you do.

Steve McMahon: I told Angela last week when we met, you know, I was one of those kids who growing up in the 1970s was not a very good student in school. In the 1970s, we had a lot of fun in school. I wasn't very prone to being what you would call a good student. And so fortunately I was able to leave school, graduated high school, went to the United States Navy, spent four years in the United States Navy figuring myself out and learning how to

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be. And then I had a calling to work with youth. I knew that right from the very beginning of my service career.

And I went to college to become what I thought would be a youth minister in church, and I decided halfway through that that wasn't my calling. It was obvious that I was to be called to work with kids who had significant, severe emotional and behavioral disorders. And so my college advisor told me at one point, you should become a public school teacher because that's where they all are. And he was absolutely right. He was absolutely right. So I became a public school teacher in the early 90s. In fact, my first year was 1989-90 school year and I was a fifth-grade school teacher.

And at that point, it was after school had already begun in a very small school district, and they gathered together all of their fifth-grade teachers and they said, we got this young man coming in to become a teacher. He's certified and we're going to hire him. And I need you to pick four kids out of each of your classes to create a new class for this guy. So I got those kids. I got a lot of kids who other people had not necessarily given up on, but didn't know what to do with. And that led me down the path of going into special education. So I became a resource teacher for students with emotional and behavior disorders. I got my master's degree in that field.

And then I was recruited to go to work for a specialized program in the state of Georgia. We had 27 programs around the state at that time, and they were called the Georgia Psychoeducational Network. Now, fortunately, the name has been changed to Georgia Network of Educational and Therapeutic Supports. And so it was a specialized program. I began as a young man, a young teacher working with kids with significant problems and discovered a calling that was right up my alley. It was exactly what I needed to be, exactly what I needed to do.

And unfortunately in the 90s, there was very little training in this field. There was Nicholas Long's Life Space Crisis interviews was there. Mary Margaret

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Woods developmental therapy model and things like that, which we learned from. But basically it was a lot of on-the-job training. What do you do when kids go off? What they taught us to do when kids go off was to physically restrain them. I was never ever comfortable with that, but that's what we did.

Fortunately, in the late 90s, now I was a program manager for this program. I met a man named Marshall Siler. And Marshall was working at a residential facility in Atlanta, and he was trained in a system called Prevention and Management of Aggressive Behavior, which was also another physical containment technique, but it was different. It was different in the proactive measures. It was different in the relationship building.

And Marshall then created a training protocol for schools called Mindset. And now that is what I do. That's what I've been doing for since 1998 when I was trained by him. I transitioned into a role as a district-wide behavior intervention specialist in which I was able to train that program to teachers throughout our district. We had a large district of 46,000 students. And I was traveling from place to place putting out fires and assisting in the professional development of young teachers.

And I really, really enjoyed that work. But in 2007, I actually created a position in the district where I was part-time for the school district so I could work alongside Marshall training trainers of this approach. And I did. And in 2011, after a series of personal incidents in which were very difficult to deal with, including the death of a spouse, becoming, you know, very intentional about life is too short to not do what you need to do. And so in 2011, I quit my job after 21 years and started working along Marshall full-time, alongside of Marshall full-time.

And then as time goes by, in 2017, unfortunately Marshall passed. And this work was left in my lap. Then the pandemic struck, right? So then we had the pandemic. And after the pandemic, I was able to gather a group of

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individuals that were seriously devoted to this work. And now we train this work nationwide.

And it is a curriculum of de-escalation first, of prevention first, of relationship building, of understanding what behavior is as a form of communication and learning how to communicate with behavior to be able to accept the persons who are acting out in a compassionate and empathic way. So that's in a nutshell, kind of what we do. We train trainers all over the country. There's thousands of people that have been trained in our in our approach. Seems to be making a difference.

What I like to say these days is it's no longer a special education thing. It started as a special education thing. But now it is a tier one culture and climate issue that everyone in our country needs to be trained. Everyone in our world needs to be trained how to connect with people who are dysregulated.

Angela Kelly: Yes. You're doing God's work. This is the work that I was called to do as well, Steve. So I think this is why we connect on such a deep level. We see the need for community building and for relationship building.

And I want to ask you a question because some of the things I see on social media, some of the posts or some of the comments will say kids are so different. Kids are much harder now. The behaviors are harder now. And I'm wondering what your thoughts are on this because you have the wisdom of a breath of experience, of over decades of experience. So you worked with kids in the 80s, 90s, early 2000s, and now here we are today in the 2020s.

Can you share that wisdom with us in terms of are kids actually behaving differently? And if they are, why do you think that is? But is that absolutely true? Because I think sometimes we throw our hands up in the air saying

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the kids are too hard these days. So I'm just curious what your thoughts are on that.

Steve McMahon: That's a great question. One I'm asked very often. And I really would, I'd like to respond by saying this. How long have adults been complaining about kids these days? Because in reality, I think forever, adults have been frustrated with the behavior of youth.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Steve McMahon: But youth also are frustrated with the responses that they get from the adults in their lives because it's a very confusing dichotomy really, because you've got parents and teachers who are trying to help kids become independent and self-actualized. And when they become independent and self-actualized, they make mistakes. And when they make mistakes, we come down on them. We come down on them in such a way as to punish them for their behaviors, to not allow them to think for themselves. And then we complain that we have high school graduates that are not problem solvers and critical thinkers.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Steve McMahon: And so it's up to us as adults to decide how we respond to the challenges of youth. And I wouldn't say that youth are any more difficult than they've always been, but I do believe wholeheartedly that they're much more sophisticated than we ever were. And they have the tools in their hands to be able to be more sophisticated. There's there's a lot of ways for students to engage with one another and with the outside world that they don't even know, given the nature of technology.

What I really believe in my heart when drives this work is that kids crave connection. Adults also crave connection, but it needs to be authentic. And I think these days in particular, students are experiencing a lot of

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inauthentic connection and it's resulting in a lack of trust, a lack of trust with adults, a lack of trust with one another.

And it's my understanding that kids are throwing themselves under the bus in their social media, which we never had to deal with. I mean, we had rumors and we had notes on the walls and writings on the bathroom wall and what not, but we never had social media. It's a completely different dynamic. It doesn't mean that they're more difficult now than they were before. It's just sophisticated.

I was a difficult child. I was a kid who was hard to connect with. I was one of those kids who rejected authority. I was one of those kids who got in trouble with the law even in high school. You know, fortunately there were pathways for me. But unfortunately these days, students with the same types of behaviors that I was experiencing in school continue to get, you know, moved out and there's limited amounts of opportunities for them because, you know, for me it was the military, whereas I know these days, it's really difficult to be able to qualify to be in the military.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Steve McMahon: So where do they go? What do they do? How do we help them be who they need to be?

Angela Kelly: Yes. Yes. You're so right about that. So it is true when people are discussing how kids are different these days, that social media is a new level that, you know, a new platform that we have never had to integrate into our raising of children, our, like, developing children. And so that is something we are learning, especially when they are so savvy in it and us people who have grown up in the 70s did not have it. You know, we're kind of always catching up to it and so we are meeting it with resistance and frustration and a misunderstanding of, you know, the kids' experience with it.

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But I do like what you said, like that is a thing and also, this is the land of and here, behaviors are behaviors. So whether somebody is dysregulated from social media or they were dysregulated from being bullied in the back alley, the behaviors are the behaviors because we're still human. We're still just as human as we were back in the 70s and 80s, right?

Steve McMahon: And thank God for that, right? And so when we start thinking about how we engage with one another, I think that a lot of people are very concerned about and I am too, about the lack of personal engagement that people have. And that's why I'm grateful for where I live. I live in a rural North Georgia mountains where we have a very small community and the community is deeply connected with one another. It's nice to see what happens in the schools and the rec department and the various opportunities that people have to get together. I can't imagine what it was like or what it is like to live in a large city these days because of the fear that exists about allowing children to play unsupervised and such.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Steve McMahon: So we had all that growing up too that kids these days just don't have. We're hyper vigilant about our supervision of our children and we should be. And we also are very exhausted as adults because we're toting our kids all over the place to make sure that they get the socialization that they need. And there's all of the sports, all of the drama things, all of the band things. I mean, I've never seen families as busy as I've seen them these days.

Angela Kelly: Yes. Yes. They have their kids in a lot of things in order to create safe social situations that are in real person.

Steve McMahon: Yes.

Angela Kelly: Because people do treat one another differently when they're face to face versus when they are on a screen, so to speak, or they're just

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anonymously making, you know, comments and following an energy that's online, you know, something viral that's happening. So I have a lot of fairly new principals out there, or I have people who are new, they tend to be new in their position, right? Whether that's at a district level or at a site level.

For these principals, and veterans we'll get to you in a minute here, but I want to like, I want to give our little new birdies a chance here to, you know, I'm thinking if I were a brand new principal, when I was a brand new principal and I was struggling, one, everything felt like a priority. I didn't know which way was left. I didn't know which way to turn. So I was playing whack-a-mole.

And number two, I had a strategy in my classroom for me personally that I learned how that learned in my classroom to work for me. But when I became a school leader, that strategy doesn't necessarily apply at a school-wide level. So I found myself kind of really uncertain about how to handle things outside of an environment that I had created.

Steve McMahon: Right.

Angela Kelly: So to our new principals out there, what might you say are some high quality, high leverage actions or decisions that they can take to set themselves on a good foot with their the culture of their school, the relationships with their students, and their highest risk behavior needs?

Steve McMahon: It's a very loaded question, but a very good question as well.

Angela Kelly: It is. I know.

Steve McMahon: It's a lot. But I, you know, we base our everything that we teach on four guiding principles. And I think one of the things that we need to make sure everyone has and every school has are your core values.

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And what are your core values and how do you display those core values? And I think that's part of the whole climate and culture piece. Sometimes we think we have core values and yet our behaviors demonstrate otherwise.

So what do we value as school? And of course we value academic excellence, right? How do we gain academic excellence without having psychological safety for all people? And I when I say all people, I mean all staff as well, because we know where we're also in a day and age in which it's really hard to recruit teachers and it's very difficult to keep teachers. And so our mindset philosophies from mindset safety management are very simple. It's like promoting choice and trust, avoiding power struggles, seeking proaction versus reaction and setting everyone up for success.

So what does it mean to set everyone up for success in an environment where perhaps they don't feel like they've been set up for success in the past? A lot of that has to do with what are we really all about? And what we're all about is assisting generations to come. How are we helping students become who they need to be in order for them to thrive? And when you're talking about the intense behaviors, those children with intense behaviors often feel the burden of and the weight of I'm the disruptive ones.

I'm the ones who you have to pay attention to, otherwise, you know, I'm going to raise heck around here and other kids aren't going to learn. And so there's a lot of my thoughts that go back to what are those students need the most? And what they need the most is someone to connect with them, you know, someone to be there, some trusted adult, somebody who's not going to judge them for who they are, and someone who's going to accept their behaviors for what that is, and that is a form of communication about unmet needs.

When we stop thinking about children who are attention seekers and start thinking of them about children who are seeking connection, our entire

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framework will change in terms of how we treat them. So it's not a punishment, it's an intervention that needs to take place before the behavior actually gets to be disruptive to the point of it being, you know, disciplinary actions being taken.

So I think part of it is my role. What is my role? I think that's a huge question for every administrator to ask. What is my role? And you are probably in the, you're in the hot seat because from the district level, you have responsibilities from your bosses who tell you what to do and how to do it and when to do it. And you have responsibility for those that work for you because you've got to help them and support them in doing what they need to do for the sake of every child in the classroom. You also have all of the people in the community pointing a finger of shame and blame towards you when things don't go well. So, you know, who am I and what is my role?

Angela Kelly: Yes. And that's what I'm here to do, help you guys. And I know Steve helps you at this level. He's training, do you train actually administrators and teachers or do you train the people who like intervention specialists?

Steve McMahon: Everyone under the sun. Anybody and everybody who is willing to learn our curriculum to redeliver it to others, we welcome them.

Angela Kelly: Okay. Understand.

Steve McMahon: It doesn't have to be someone with a PhD, but we do require someone to have a GED in order to do this. But I think that the work communicates throughout the entire spectrum. How to help people figure out their stuff. So one of the nicest things about the mindset training curriculum is it's really a freedom when we teach people how to do this because honestly, you don't have to come up with any answers.

Angela Kelly: Right.

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Steve McMahon: You're not there to solve anyone's problem. You're just there to hear them out. So when someone walks in the office, for example, on a Monday morning and she doesn't want to go to class and she's 36 and she's a teacher, she needs to be heard. She needs to be seen. What's going on? And you know what? She may not need to be in that classroom today. But what else is going on? What's driving that feeling? What's the root cause of that behavior? And really, whose problem is it? It's not yours, it's hers. And how do we help her figure out her pathway towards success?

And it's really not that hard. It's a four-step model that we teach of, like I said, acknowledgement, acceptance, validation, and empowerment. And it's it's deep. It's also based in neurology and understanding the human brain and knowing how and when to intervene, knowing how and when to accept the fact that that's irrational behavior and she's thinking or he's thinking down a pathway, they're not necessarily thinking right right now. And that is the truth. They're not. And so if we think we're going to get logical, rational conversations with somebody who's not in their rational brain, then we need to rethink how our responses need to be, reshape our responses that is.

Angela Kelly: Yeah, yes. Can you walk us through like a story or an example of a student you've worked with or a school that you've worked with? Just I want to give listeners some context here as to what this might look like in real time.

Steve McMahon: Well, you know, the thing is when you're talking about administrators in the office space, they're likely already doing these things. But I'll never forget this one moment back in like, I guess it was around the mid 2000s, like 2005 or thereabouts. And I walked into a program, the program I used to manage. And now I'm doing the district-wide behavior job. And every time I got to a space doing that job where I needed to find my bearings, I would always go back to my specialized program and hang out there with staff there and help those kids.

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But I walked in there, there was a student who was in the sixth grade, we'll call him Johnny for the sake of anonymity, but Johnny was in the corner. He was refusing to get up. He was angry. He had thrown things around. And it was time to get ready to go to the cafeteria for lunch. And the teachers directed him to clean up his things so that he could get ready to go to lunch as well. And he told them to F off. I'm not doing anything that you people say.

And he was just in that stage, you know? And I told him, "Look, I'm fine. I'll I'll how about this? I'll hang out with him. You guys just go and you let me know how we're we're I'll if you get bring his lunch back or I'll take him later, you know, one or the other." So they left and they went down to the cafeteria. And I stayed in that classroom and I was just silent. And at that time, it was the age of flip phones. Remember flip phones?

Angela Kelly: Oh yes.

Steve McMahon: Remember the little skinny Motorola flip phones?

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Steve McMahon: So, I actually had two phones. I had one that was my personal cell phone. I also had one that was my office, my business cell phone, my from my district. And so I walked over near the file cabinet where he was and I put my work cell phone on the top of that file cabinet, turned around and walked back and sat at the desk. And he was about 15 feet away from me. And I said, "Hey Johnny, I'll tell you what, if that phone rings, will you answer it?" And he did. I called that phone. He was refusing to talk with anybody. He was sitting there for about 10 to 15 minutes, not doing anything. And the phone rang. He answered the phone. And I said, "Hey Johnny, I see that you've answered the phone. You're standing by the file cabinet and it seems like you've been pretty angry for some time."

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And he spoke to me on the phone while we were both in the same room. And you could see his behavior declining so long as he was beginning to talk. And all he was doing was telling his story. And all I was doing was saying, "Yeah, that's really hard. That's really hard." And so it happened again. "Yeah, it happened again." I mean, he's going on and on and on. And then next thing you know, he was fine. He cleaned up his area that he had made a mess in, and he and I together walked down to lunch. It was great because it wasn't about shame, it wasn't about blame.

It was about acceptance and acknowledgement and validation. He had every right to feel the way that he felt because when he told me the story from his perspective, he was being treated unfairly. He was being unjustly accused of things. And so whether or not that be true is irrelevant, right? Because all my goal was just to calm him down. So we calmed it down. I said, "What do you want to do?" He said, "I want to go to lunch." So we went to lunch. We came back from lunch. He got back engaged in class and everything was fine.

And I was talking about 10 minutes later with ladies in the social work office and there was a knock at the door and they answered the door and it was him. And they said, what do you need? He says, I'm waiting for another phone call. And I said, what phone call? He said, you need to, the phone call that tells me I did a really good job calming down. And I said, "Gotcha. Go back to class." So I went to the front office and I said to the receptionist, I need you to do an all call. I'm going to call your phone, you do an all call and tell him that he has a phone call in the front office.

And so that one interaction with that one kid in that one way, every time I saw him from that point forward, our relationship was cool. Everybody else could have been angry and mad and everybody else is just a jerk. But Mr. Steve, he's the cool one. And you know, we have assistant principals all over the country that know these kids to that level.

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And I don't know if you saw this, but on social media recently, there was a principal of a high school in Lake in Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia that their kids actually staged a fight in the cafeteria. And he went running from his office to the cafeteria and it was videotaped by other kids. The entire time it was just a prank. He held one of these kids in the way that I taught him to hold this kid. And then when he turned around, the entire cafeteria broke out into happy birthday and they sang their principal a happy birthday.

Angela Kelly: Oh, yes. I saw that.

Steve McMahon: That man's name is Mr. Bobby Davis and he's been trained in our mindset approach for the past 15 years. He's a wonderful human being. Loves those kids. And you can see the climate of that building love they love him as well. That's what I want to see schools be. I want to see schools be a place where the students and the and the staff are that connected. And Bobby's made that happen. And a lot of, I believe a lot of it's because of how he changed his routine, if you will, once he learned our curriculum. That district has 16 schools. And in that district, every time someone becomes an assistant principal, they become a trainer of mindset. That's just the way they do business with us.

Angela Kelly: That's wonderful.

Steve McMahon: So they have shaped their climate and their culture of their school district based on our partially based on our curriculum.

Angela Kelly: Yes. Yes.

Steve McMahon: I just love that.

Angela Kelly: They have applied that curriculum with, you know, consistency and intention and that's really what makes the difference.

Steve McMahon: It's not easy.

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Angela Kelly: No, it's not easy. So I want to ask you something because I'm thinking what a listener's thinking right now and they're like, oh, in the story that you just told, what makes that so wonderful is that there was an outside person to come in who was very trained and skilled in the technique. So Johnny didn't have any negative association with Steve. Johnny, like this guy was coming in as a neutral person.

So when a teacher's had a conflict and now teacher's dysregulated and there's been an entanglement, right? Teacher's dysregulated and Johnny's dysregulated, teacher might not necessarily be able to be the one if there's been an entanglement where they are the de-escalator. But so that's where the principal or the dean of students or the vice principal can come in and say, and be this calm, more neutral.

Steve McMahon: Or how about this? What about another teacher? How about the teachers just swap out for a few moments? How about somebody in the hallway? Because in the in the book I wrote Transformative Crisis Management, there's some scenarios in here as well. And those who are trained well in this de-escalation protocol, they know that they can walk into any situation if they can remain calm.

But if you weren't there in the beginning, you don't have all those feelings associated with it. But if we've trained our staff properly, then tapping out is appropriate. And we need to tap out long before we start losing it ourselves. One of the best intervention strategies I've ever recommended for any principal and teacher is the teacher calls too late. We know that. By the time they call the office, it's already too late because that relationship has been damaged.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Steve McMahon: But what if we see these kids when they walk in the morning differently and you start watching and you start thinking about the nervous system as a surveillance system, which is taught to us by Stephen

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Porges in the polyvagal theory. We think about what do these kids look like when they come in the morning? And I got to know, I need to I need to get near Angela today. Something's up with Angela. I can tell there's something going on.

So why not do it earlier rather than wait for the incident to occur? So how about calling the office and saying, I need assistance in room 222 and somebody comes to your room and instead of them taking the child out of the room, they instead take your place as the instructor in the classroom and you walk out with that kid. You go out and take a walk. You go sit on a bench with this child for about five minutes.

And I want people to understand too is we're not trying to teach teachers to be mental health therapists. It's not our role nor is it theirs, but most of them feel that way at one time or another these days. I wasn't trained as a therapist. I'm like, I know, we're not trying to teach you to be a therapist. What I want you to do is what I call emotional triage.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Steve McMahon: You're doing emotional triage every morning. And you know who else can do that? Bus drivers.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Steve McMahon: And people who greet and meet kids every morning and people who sit in lunchrooms while students are having breakfast.

Angela Kelly: Yup, the breakfast program.

Steve McMahon: You know, these are times, these are prime opportunities, especially on a Monday morning to know what's gone on over the weekend.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

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Steve McMahon: And we know that kids who are committed and engaged for the social well-being of one another and for the climate and the culture of the school, they come in already talking to us about what happened over the weekend. They're not the ones I'm so concerned about though.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Steve McMahon: And it's really unfortunate that we're talking about this today because in Bend, Oregon last week,

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Steve McMahon: Again, it's happened in America where someone had walked in and killed innocent children and adults in a school building.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Steve McMahon: And I think where are we for these kids that how is it that someone can do that? It's an evil time in which we live. How do we help students like that?

Angela Kelly: Yes, that was my question to you. I think we'd be a miss not to bring it up because it did just happen. I did record a separate podcast on it with my own thoughts around how to support people in crisis. And I was thinking about this conversation, Steve, because it's happened between the time that we met and the time that we're speaking now. And it was a special education student from that school.

And I can't recall the stats, so I'm not going to quote the stats, but there is a significant number of when you do the research on school crisis like these, it's a student that is the perpetrator. And I thought about you and I was wondering your take on that because clearly for every behavior, there is a reason to that person, whether it's rational to us on the outside or not. But there are thoughts, there are feelings, and there are reasons, rationales in their mind to make that decision and then to go forward with it. What are

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your thoughts about just that aspect of what happened in Ben and in so many other communities?

Steve McMahon: And it happens everywhere, you know? And what I say about our mindset technique too is it can change the trajectory of a person's life. A moment, a brief moment of contact. And I think about it when I hear the stories of what happens in situations like Bend and elsewhere is could someone have intervened prior to him getting to that school?

And someone did try to intervene. He was shooting at people out on the street before he ever got to the school. The evidence is, if someone were to have stepped in as he was leaving the apartment, as he was leaving the house and said, "Hey, I see you. It seems like you're having a really bad day today. What's up with this?" Maybe that would have been enough. Who knows? But we'll never know in situations like that.

Angela Kelly: No.

Steve McMahon: But, you know, it breaks my, first and foremost, it just breaks my heart every time things like this happen. It just tears me apart on the inside. And I feel for those families and for the whole community. And I feel also for our educational community as a whole because, you know, when Parkland happened in Florida, it's interesting because I was in a sixth grade classroom in a middle school in the district that I used to work with doing a consultation.

And I said to this sixth grade group of teachers, you know, it's not the, it's the kids in the shadows that I worry about the most. It's the kids who lurk and they're not connected, they're not engaged, they're not, who's paying attention to these children? Who's, which adults are they connected to in the building? And do we even know their names? Have we gone out of our way to make sure that they're also included in whatever way we can to this

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entire dynamic of feeling a sense of belonging? Being a part of something bigger than themselves?

And on that very afternoon, it was Valentine's Day and I walked out of that school, got in my car to go home and I heard the news of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida. I remember the day, I remember when Columbine happened. I was teaching in the classroom at that time as well. You know, our whole world changed.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Steve McMahon: But a good response to it has been the hardwired hardware, if you will, of school security. And I know I'm really grateful for school security. And there were more fences, there's more ways to check, there's cameras everywhere, there's buzz-ins. But as we saw the other day, it didn't matter, did it? So the bigger picture is how do we keep people from becoming that person? How do we how do we engage with our community? And it, you know, it's not just kids either. How do we engage with one another to, blessed are the peacemakers, right?

Angela Kelly: Yes. I think that's what makes the work you're doing, the work that I'm doing so relevant. I honestly don't know what else could be more of a priority right now in our schools than the work that you're doing, the work that I'm doing, which is teaching people de-escalation, teaching them regulation, co-regulation, helping them understand, going internal data, using neuroscience. I don't understand why we haven't shifted that into the number one priority in our schools.

Steve McMahon: That's a legislative problem. And when we talk about, and our in our curriculum, we are intentional about talking about barriers to creating this culture of prevention in which we seek. And we tell people all the time, our foundational approach needs to be trained every person in every building across the nation. Of course, we're not going to train our physical containment techniques with everybody. Those are very specific

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techniques for very specific environments and for crisis intervention teams. We have those already established.

What we really need to do is create a priority for the foundation of de-escalation. And some districts are working toward that end. Some districts have this embedded in their five-year strategic plan. And they're using our services to do so. And we have trained trainers in those buildings. But when I talk with our trainers, they're very concerned in that they're not given the time to train it well.

And I'm like, well, you know, it needs to be an embedded ongoing conversation. It needs to be embedded in a professional learning community. It needs to be something that's continuously talked about. It needs to be something that we talk with one another about when we're having our problems too, because it's not just a teacher to student issue. It's a person to person issue, as you said from the very beginning. It's a human thing. How do we help someone who's having a difficult time with whatever it might be?

And some of it could be financial burdens. Some of it could be living in situations where there's domestic violence occurring. Some of it could be drug abuse or family members who have been diagnosed with something. It could be a child having been hit by a car. It could be the death of a spouse, the death of a parent. It's hard enough just to be human, right?

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Steve McMahon: So when you're also expecting that very person to stand in front of 28 to 35 students every day and help these kids try to achieve academic excellence, it's a lot. It's just a lot. And we know that when care is prioritized, I remember back in the day when I was doing the work in the district and we were at a faculty meal, we're all family here. I'm like, yeah, but there are plenty of dysfunctional families and we also look like

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one as well. I want to say this too, that our work family, our what the people that we work around can be the most supportive of us personally.

And I experienced that tremendously when my wife was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2008. I was again, I was working part-time for the school district at that time. My boss called me the very next morning and she said, Steve, you need to come back to work full-time. And I was like, Debbie, wait, she was just, Cindy was just diagnosed with cancer. And she was like, I know, I know, but you don't understand, we cannot provide for you FMLA as a part-time employee, but we can as a full-time employee and the board's redrawing your contract and you're going to come sign it so that we can help you take care of your family.

Angela Kelly: Oh.

Steve McMahon: And I was, I didn't know because I'm pretty naive about business, right? So I didn't know that was such a big deal until about a year ago when I was speaking at a conference and somebody came up to me and said, that was the dumbest business decision I've ever heard of, that for a district to do that. And I said, well, you know what? I don't think it was a business decision, was it?

Angela Kelly: No.

Steve McMahon: You know, it was because of love. It was because of care and because of compassion. And if we can be motivated by those things, then I think the world will be a much better place.

Angela Kelly: I agree 100%. So Steve, if there's like, I always ask this at the end of the interview, if there's one piece of wisdom, if you could like package up some wisdom that you have and give it as a gift to every school leader out there. What would it be? What would you say? What would you tell them? What would you share?

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Steve McMahon: I think that's a really, you know, it's a good way to end this kind of conversation. I really want people to understand that there's so much out of your control that really frees up your spirit to be able to say, you know what? It'll all work out. And I think about the pressure and the and the concerns of a school administrator and it's absolutely huge. I know that. And there's a lot of responsibility. There's a lot of concern I have for you as well as a school administrator because you got to take care of you. I think that's probably primarily important that we need to be focused on our own personal well-being.

And we need to surround ourselves with people who care. We need to surround ourselves with people who are able to listen when we're frustrated. We need to be able to be honest and transparent and authentic. But I say this to my people that work with me all the time. I'm like, once you realize that I don't control anything other than how I respond to everything, it is really it's very freeing in my spirit. It's very easy to say, it'll all work out. And it may not work out the way you want it to work out. It may not work out according to your particular plan, but if you just will let go sometimes and see where it's going to go and if you surround yourself by the right people, it typically works out pretty well.

Angela Kelly: Yes. Yes.

Steve McMahon: And also have grace for yourself.

Angela Kelly: Oh.

Steve McMahon: As much as we talk about forgiving others and applying grace to others, I want you to look in the mirror and also apply that to yourself. That it's okay that we've had some mistakes. It's okay that there have been some bumps in the road.

Angela Kelly: Yes. Because that's a part of the ride. It's a part of this journey. And I think when we that was so beautifully said. And I think that

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when we get into a pickle, we resist it. We think it shouldn't be happening. We think kids shouldn't have emotional reactions or that there shouldn't be intense behaviors. That's part of the problem is we're resisting the reality of the human experience. But when we just go, "Oh, they're having a human moment, that's triggering me. I'm having a human moment. I need a phone call, right? I need someone to call me on the phone.

Steve McMahon: But you know how about if you can recognize that's going on, if you can sense that yourself, you're also becoming dysregulated, it's really nice to have colleagues who are trained in the same things. Because we talk about mindset training helping the district or the school have a common language. And so a common language to help people in crisis or help people in conflict.

And if I'm trained in the same things you're trained in and I walk over to you Angela and I say, it looks like you need to go get in your car. And you were trained in our curriculum, you would recognize that acronym as being this, calm, aware, and respectful. Stay in your car. And if you can't, you don't need to be the one with this kid right now. If you can't, someone else needs to step in, which requires humility on your part.

Angela Kelly: Yes.

Steve McMahon: So that's what embedded in our curriculum are all of these nuances. It's just, I am blessed to be able to, I say to people all the time, I have a charmed life now because I was able to walk away from everything and just do what I'm passionate about. And fortunately, what I'm passionate about is helping others become well. So it's a, it's a nice job, if you want to call it a job.

Angela Kelly: It's a wonderful job, especially in the field of education. It's a calling for sure. It's a lifestyle, not a job, as they say.

Steve McMahon: Definitely. Yeah.

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Angela Kelly: Definitely. It was such a pleasure to have you, Steve. I am so delighted to have met you and to know this work. This podcast has just brought me to connecting with so many people, but you're just such a gem.

Thank you, Empowered Principals. That's it for today. We could probably go on for hours talking about this, but if you have more questions, you have concerns, you want to connect with Steve, all of that information, all of the links will be down in the show notes. Please check him out, check out the work. Especially if you are feeling like this is a priority for you, if it's time to take this on, if you're ready to get the training you need and deserve and your staff and your students, this is the real deal. So please check out Steve's work. Have the most empowered week and we'll see you guys all next week. Take good care. Bye.

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