

# Preface

In the fall of 1983, I was hired for my first principalship at an elementary school in a far western suburb of Chicago. Armed with a newly acquired doctoral degree in administration and “dressed for success,” I eagerly anticipated helping teachers improve their instructional effectiveness, setting high expectations for students, and developing curriculum. Somewhere along the way, I must have missed the course to prepare me for the almost daily encounters I would have with parents who were angry, troubled, afraid, or in some cases, “just plain crazy.” Although the latter group was certainly a small minority, there were enough parents in my school (and I’m sure yours is no different) who seemed to leave all reason and common sense at the front door as they stormed the office. Dealing with these moms and dads often made me feel like I was picking my way through a minefield, ignorant of where the next explosion would occur.

Oh, I’d had the requisite school-community relations course. But the syllabus contained nothing about marriage and family counseling or conflict resolution. I started to think that perhaps I’d earned the wrong degree, but it was too late. The problems were on my doorstep from day one. I remember one incident in Technicolor. It was Halloween, and the excitement in the hallways was palpable. A parade headlined the afternoon’s festivities, and I had my costume hung on the back of the office door. I would change during the lunch hour.

My secretary pronounced my Busy Bee getup perfect. “Great choice. You’re always buzzing around,” she said. I was too distracted to reflect on exactly what she meant and headed to the hallway as the children came in from lunch recess. I was greeted

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with compliments and calls of delight. My black leotards and turtleneck were topped with an oversized garbage bag of the same color, striped with wide yellow tape. Tightly secured at my arms, legs, and neck, the bag made a perfect bee body. The piece de resistance of my costume was a headpiece on which golden spheres bobbed from springy wires.

After two months on the job, I was feeling confident, and I looked forward to greeting the many parents who traditionally attended the parade. My euphoria lasted all of fifteen seconds before I was blindsided by a mom I'd already come to know and love. She sailed into the office with eyes blazing. Fortunately, she was armed with nothing but her tongue, but she proceeded to deliver a lashing that could have bested any belt or razor strop. "No one is going to treat my child like that," she screamed. "Do something." I longed for a genie to appear and calm this crazed woman, but no one came to my rescue. I took her into my office and elicited the story. She had just happened to be walking down the hall when her third-grade daughter's class went by on its way to the rest rooms. Naturally, the classroom teacher selected this precise moment to give the aforementioned daughter a good dressing down for all the world to see and hear, including mom—an unfortunate juxtaposition of circumstances, to be sure. I wished at that moment for an alien spaceship to land on the playground and transport teacher, child, and parent to outer space. They were all out of control. What was I to do? Desperate for any solution, I suggested a meeting after school with the teacher. Mom insisted that her husband, who was only a phone call away, come immediately to school and talk with me. Apparently, she felt that he could put me in my place. He arrived shortly, gave me the once-over in my bee costume, and slumped into a corner in my office, saying nothing. Obviously, he'd learned that it was best to be seen and not heard. Dressed in camouflage that did not appear to be part of a Halloween costume, he looked like he might just pull a gun from beneath his jacket at any moment.

Once again, mom recounted the story of her daughter's humiliation in vivid detail. The retelling only fueled her anger, and she demanded that I fire the teacher on the spot. Save for tenure, it was a tempting thought. Still no word from dad. We agreed that we would meet with the teacher after school to

gather more information; dad nodded his assent. He eyeballed me head to toe one last time and quietly followed his wife from the office.

As soon as the parade ended, I made a quick change out of my costume, raced to the third-grade hallway, and briefed the teacher on my tentative plan for the meeting. “Stay calm, listen, and then be prepared to apologize for losing your cool in front of the world,” I advised. “Above all, don’t be defensive or raise your voice.” I was grateful it was Friday, and I’d have the weekend to recover.

The meeting went as well as could be expected. We all agreed that the daughter’s behavior was unacceptable. We all agreed (even the teacher) that the teacher’s behavior was unacceptable. I even coaxed a small apology out of mom for being so disruptive and inappropriate earlier. Still no word from dad. He seemed content to watch from the sidelines. It was nearly 5:00 p.m. when everyone filed out of my office. Dad brought up the rear. Just before we reached the door, he leaned over, and with a wink, whispered in my ear, “I liked you better in your bee costume.” A sexist remark to be sure, but for me, it was the perfect ending to a “no good, very bad, horrible day” in the life of an average principal.

In the years that followed, my meetings with parents who were angry, troubled, afraid, or totally out of control would become commonplace. I no longer developed sweaty palms, a racing heart, and blotchy skin. I became a confident and capable administrator who had acquired the skills to calm the angriest and to counsel the most troubled. In the pages ahead, I’ll share the strategies that have helped me deal with challenging parents. You will learn how to handle “close encounters of the parental kind” with confidence, and although I can’t promise a money-back guarantee, I’m quite sure you’ll gradually feel the satisfaction that comes from finding solutions to difficult problems.

## **MY DEFINITION OF “CRAZY”**

When I first suggested the title of this book as a possibility in 1997, the rare objections to it came from individuals who

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worked in the mental health field and had never been school principals. They were concerned, and rightly so, with the stigma attached to the term *crazy* when applied to individuals with mental illness. Educators, however, resonated with the term. They had all been verbally or even physically assaulted by parents who were totally out of control. In this second edition, as in the first, I use the term tongue in cheek, to specifically refer to *irrational behavior that is upsetting to others—whatever its cause*. Parents can of course be angry, troubled, and afraid *without* being irrational. In fact, there are dozens of situations that demand a strong dose of righteous indignation. It is when parental behavior crosses the line from being assertive and appropriate to being dangerous, hostile, demeaning, threatening, manipulative, or aggressive (either in upfront *or* passive ways) that it not only becomes “crazy” but also tends to make educators somewhat “crazy” themselves. I wish to be sensitive to my colleagues, friends, and family members who are dealing with depression and anxiety and any other disorders of which I am not aware, and I intend no offense or prejudice.

**WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR**

I have written *How to Deal With Parents Who Are Angry, Troubled, Afraid, and Just Plain Crazy* for the following audiences:

- Principals at every level who want to enhance their personal effectiveness in working with parents to build productive learning communities
- Supervisors, mentors, or coaches whose goal is to encourage the principals with whom they work to become more confident and successful in their relationships with parents
- College and university teachers of courses in school-community relations or the principalship who wish to introduce prospective principals to the challenges of interacting positively with a diverse parent community
- Central office administrators who are expected to deal with a wide variety of angry parents in their job roles as

well as supervise, coach, and mentor principals in their districts

- Classroom teachers who are considering the principalship and wish to broaden their perspective regarding their interactions and relationships with parents

## **SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE BOOK**

The second edition of *How to Deal With Parents Who Are Angry, Troubled, Afraid, and Just Plain Crazy* contains the following special features and additions:

- An enhanced section of strategies for dealing with the ever-increasing population of parents who fall into the irrational and out-of-control category
- Updated references and examples
- A brand-new conclusion containing Ten Goals-at-a-Glance to keep your school-community relations on target
- An updated and easy-to-administer Healthy School Checklist to help you determine if your school's culture and climate encourage parents or push them over the edge
- A comprehensive facilitator's guide printed on shaded paper that includes energizers, think-alouds, suggestions for role-playing, and questions for dialogue

## **OVERVIEW OF THE CONTENTS**

Chapter 1 describes the parents of today's children and discusses the critical issues that cause misunderstandings in schools. Chapter 2 includes a variety of responsive strategies for defusing parents who are angry, troubled, afraid, and irrationally out of control. This chapter will help you to ease the fears, calm the troubled spirits, and shut down the angry outbursts of parents so that you can move to exploration and action in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 explains numerous helpful exploration and action strategies, including a seven-step problem-solving process to help ensure the quick solution of the problems that worry and trouble

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parents. Chapter 4 is titled *Creating and Nurturing a Healthy School*. After reading this chapter, you will be able to analyze your school environment to discover whether you and your faculty are on your way to health and happiness or are unwittingly creating a dysfunctional “school family.” Chapter 5 includes dozens of proactive things you can do to develop a supportive and involved parent community. The conclusion summarizes the key points of the book and is designed to help you keep your mission focused on accentuating the positive in your relationships with parents. The facilitator’s guide at the back of the book is designed to help you facilitate a book study group, provide lesson plans for the next university class you teach, or suggest ideas for personal reflection and goal setting. Throughout the book you will find quotations from teachers and parents who, while willing to have their experiences and opinions included in the book, wished to remain anonymous.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

A special thank you to the educators across the country who have shared with me the ways in which they have used the first edition of this book to improve the effectiveness of their interactions with angry parents. If not for their enthusiasm and support, this second edition would not have been written. One of the delights of being an author in this age of cyber-communication is receiving e-mails from readers. If you would like to ask a question, share a story or experience based on your implementation of an idea in this book, *or* point out an error, please contact me at [emcewan@elainemcewan.com](mailto:emcewan@elainemcewan.com), and I will answer you as quickly as I can. Or visit my Web site: <http://www.elainemcewan.com>.

This book is dedicated to Gracia Alkema, publisher emeritus of Corwin Press. The first edition was one of the earliest books I wrote for Corwin, and she stood behind me and the concept 100 percent. I am grateful for her editorial judgment and publishing savvy as well as our eight-year friendship.

As always, I owe a special debt of gratitude to my husband and business partner, E. Raymond Adkins. Those readers who have attended my workshops and presentations know what a steady and supportive presence he is. His wisdom and common sense are the final arbiters of what goes into all of my books.