Jeffrey **BENSON**

Hanging In

Strategies for Teaching the Students Who Challenge Us Most

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Strategies for Teaching the Students Who Challenge Us Most

Introduction.....vii

Chapter 1: Toni: Absolutes and Teachable Moments..... 1

This story centers on a student whose needs bring to question which elements of the school's culture are absolute, and which can bend.

Chapter 2: Charlie and Dean: Creative Transitions..... 15

The stories of Charlie and Dean reveal the problems with transitions: some are about the physical hurdles in schools, and some are about the atypical hurdles buried within the students.

Chapter 3: Rosa: Sitting Together in Silence..... 29

The story of Rosa is about the strength of silently hanging in when enough words have already been spoken.

Chapter 4: Marcus: Adults Always Have Ulterior Motives..... 43

The story of Marcus is about a student who doesn't share the goals that adults have implicitly put into place for him.

Chapter 5: Paul: His Chaos, Staff Patience..... 53

The story of Paul is about a student whose learning disability challenges the staff's patience and compassion.

Chapter 6: Cedric: Performing but Not Learning..... 71

The story of Cedric is about how, in our effort to be positive, we can mistake guessing for understanding.

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Introduction

I was chairing an hour-long meeting with school administrators, teachers, therapists, and support staff. The group had convened to deal with a single issue: how Dean, a volatile 4th grader, could more successfully transition from class to class. Dean insisted on being first in line, argued over every expectation, and swore at staff as he quickly lost his temper. He was exhausting his teachers, classmates, and everyone who was called in to de-escalate him and then assess his readiness for rejoining his class. We hypothesized what triggered Dean's reactions. We reviewed his complex family history, his ability to cognitively understand directions, and his ability to physically manage the passage from one room to another. We reviewed what staff had been saying to him, what rewards and punishments had been tried (all so far without lasting success), the quality of his relationships with peers and key school staff, and the overlapping goals we held for Dean and the school. By the end of the hour, we had synthesized our perspectives and developed a plan (the focus of Chapter 2 in this book). At that point, the principal turned to me and said, "That should do the trick." I sighed and responded, "There are no tricks."

There are no tricks to working with our most challenging students. If there were simple solutions to support their growth, the

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students wouldn't be challenging. The professionals most responsible for dealing with these students—among many and most often, special education teachers, social workers, occupational therapists—do not have a secret cache of techniques. These professionals have received training in identifying disabilities and employing common interventions, but our most challenging students confound common solutions. These students crisscross categories of disabilities, challenging us to develop new and complex interventions, in combinations we have never tried before.

In examining the effect solely of trauma on students, Cole and colleagues (2005, p. 4) identify a long list of potential problems: decreased concentration, fragmented memory, poor organization, language deficits, perfectionism, depression, anxiety and self-destructive behavior. It is reasonable to add to this list excessive absences, uneven skill development, and deficits in content knowledge. Now add a learning disability and all its possible presentations. There are no textbook cases that point to absolute interventions for students with such layered lists of issues. Each child is truly unique, and we can't "fix them" immediately.

The challenge for the staff is to hang in. Students like Dean can shed maladaptive behaviors for better ones, but not overnight. These students remind us that humans don't change as much as grow. We grow through support, useful feedback, trust, safety, and time. There is no guarantee that any intervention will work, and there are no guarantees that growth will happen within a given period of time. Hattie (2009), in summarizing his extensive studies on student learning, writes:

> Learning is spontaneous, individualistic, and often earned through effort. It is a timeworn, slow, gradual, fits-and-starts kind of process, which can have a flow of its own, but requires passion, patience, and attention to detail. (p. 2)

With no reliably predictable timetable for success, these students try our patience, arouse our emotions, and often bruise our

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professional pride as teachers, problem solvers, and caretakers. Dean's difficulty transitioning between classes triggered anger in some staff. For others he provoked sadness—"When Dean is like that, I'd rather be any other person in the world than that little guy." For many, Dean brought up feelings of incompetence and despair. They were professional helpers, and Dean would not let them help; his failure became their failure. We have been schooling children for many centuries, yet a 10-year-old was baffling the experts. Mary Haywood Metz (1993) notes that students "can confirm or destroy" a teacher's "pride in craft." She explains the students' power: "Because teachers' work consists of affecting their students, they are dependent on their students both for the actual success of their work and evidence of that success" (p. 130).

We are in the infancy of understanding what works for every child, at the beginning stage of identifying practices that can cut across community, cultural, and personal contexts. Dean has no researched cohort—in his case, an upbringing in poverty with a single mother, a disabled older sibling, attention deficit disorder (ADD), advanced language skills, and the experience of having switched schools three times. His case is unique. So we hang in, take actions, reflect on progress, recalibrate, take more actions, collect our stories, and recalibrate again. We hang in. We may have to hang in through as many as 100 repetitions for a student to grow into new skills and for us to learn what works (Benson, 2012).

Everyone who hung in with Dean learned a lot, and we are all better at what we do because of that work. A challenging student provides one of the best means of reaching mastery in our field—but only when teachers themselves get support and safety, and when they are not dealing with many such students in isolation. Hanging in with challenging students can be so meaningful and reveal to us the richness and novelty of human relationships. What we experience in schools reinforces our uniquely human capacities to accommodate, synthesize, learn, and grow.

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Storytelling

As I chaired the meeting about Dean, I knew we could not pull a manual off a shelf to find step-by-step directions to solve his problems. Instead, I combed through my years of teaching experience, looking for a student and set of conditions that resembled, in some key components, what was happening with Dean. I knew I would not find an exact match with his environment, *and* with his cognitive abilities, *and* with his chaotic life, *and* with his age. But I did find a promising story.

I said to the team, "I once worked with a student named Charlie, and we. . . ." With my storytelling, I was inviting the others to find similarities and differences, or as we might say in a basic English class, to compare and contrast the setting, the characters, and the primary conflict in Dean's story with the one I was telling about Charlie. The story about Charlie—who was 10 years older, of a different race, economic class, and cognitive ability—did spark our creative solutions for Dean. Buried within all those differences were important, but not so obvious, parallels. My expertise, born of experience and theory, was in identifying the parallels, the most salient aspects of one context with another. The group's collective wisdom pulled the relevant elements from Charlie's story into a useful intervention for Dean.

What I offer in this book are stories of hanging in, the practice-based evidence from working with our most challenging students, and the wisdom I have gleaned from each. Many of my experiences come from working in special education settings. The intimacy of small classes (8 students with one teacher) and of small schools (100 students) provides the opportunity to drill deeply into the complex layers of social, emotional, cognitive, cultural, economic, and environmental factors that make each student who he or she is. There is never one thing that defines a challenging student, never one cause, never one life event, never one disability. As noted above, if it were one thing, the solutions would be simple. One of my own teachers confronted me with this important and demanding advice:

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"Keep the complexity as long as you can." My stories invite you to hang in with the complexities of our challenging students and to take action with no guarantees of immediately observable success. The only guarantee is more evidence that you can use with the next challenging student—because I can guarantee you, there will be another one who challenges your capacity to hang in.

With that evidence, we must work together along the path from stories to informed practice. Just as two people can have a different interpretation of the motives of Rick Blaine, Humphrey Bogart's character in *Casablanca*, team professionals will have many analyses of the root causes of a child's behavior and of what is to be learned from our interventions. The important work is to discuss and synthesize those perspectives while interactions with the student are still fresh. Once, in a meeting convened to develop an intervention with a particularly idiosyncratic student, I said, "This is a lot like our work with Harry a few years back." No sooner did I offer that bit of wisdom than hands shot up around the room with a chorus of, "No, this is not like Harry at all." We had never shared our various conclusions about what had caused Harry to be so challenging; with the passage of time, the team was unable to reconstruct the events in Harry's story in order to craft a shared understanding. Our stories are valuable only in as much as we collectively construct their meaning and articulate a shared wisdom. Set time aside to tell stories. The learning must be made explicit; we hang in collectively.

I have learned so much from working with our traumatized, neglected, and remarkably alive students and with their teachers. I want to distinguish that sentiment from the idea that, when I am teaching a core curriculum subject, my students are also teaching me. I come to them with an expertise in teaching theory and content knowledge that is beyond their years. I have no doubt who the teacher of the class is. What I learn, the gift to me, is how *this* student and *this* student and *this* student are coming to understand *this* lesson in the varied and unpredictable ways the human mind can work. To be fascinated with the thinking and growth of each student is a

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formula for lifelong learning as an educator. Small classes are prime real estate for such adult education.

The teachers in our schools who embody this accumulated education should be treasured and exalted, but too often they work without the resources and support their challenges demand. The admiration they get is often in the form of "I don't know how you do your work," but rarely are these teachers asked to say how they actually do their work, as if the teachers of our most challenging students are in a different profession or possess superhuman qualities. This is a loss for us all, because the accumulated stories of hanging in with our most challenging students are vital to maintaining a diverse and just society. There will be other students like Dean and Charlie in our schools, and for now what works is less a step-by-step program in a box than a sharing of the learned wisdom from hanging in.

How This Book Is Organized

Each chapter of the book explores pedagogical issues through my work with one or two particular students. A couple of the students are composites. All of the students' names have been changed, and some identifying characteristics altered, out of respect for their privacy and their struggles, from which they have not always emerged with the hoped-for success. Those struggles underscore an important lesson: however hard challenging students have been to teach, their lives have been exponentially more difficult to live. I spent many an hour pondering what my schools could do for these students, but then I turned off my computer and rejoined my loving family, in my safe home where the bills had been paid. Many of our students did not have such luxuries.

Each chapter opens with a short summary of the issues that emerged from the work with the given students. The ensuing portraits of the students and description of the evolution of their growth are designed to embed those issues in the complexity of the daily labor of schools. As you read, if you are wondering how the lessons

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from each story apply to the students in your school, you are on the right path. Interventions that travel unaltered from one challenging student to another are a fool's gold. Please pan for the nuggets that fit your setting.

If it takes a village to raise typical children, challenging children in our villages need their schools to provide critical attention and some very unique structures. Thomas Armstrong (2012) urges us to make schools "positive niches—advantageous environments that minimize weaknesses and maximize strengths and thereby help students flourish" (p. 13). At the end of each chapter in this book, I will suggest approaches for "hanging in" that provide the most consistency and flexibility in developing those positive niches. The approaches are divided into three categories:

1. *For individual students:* Here you will find a variety of suggestions for students who may present similar challenges, and some warnings about the limitations of any given intervention.
2. *For the adult team:* Hanging in with challenging students is an ongoing curriculum for the adults in a school. Here you will find recommendations for the team to gain skills, support, and not lose hope through the ups and downs of the work. You will also find prompts for storytelling.
3. *For administrators:* Administrators have their hands on the gears of a school and exert the most structural, political, and symbolic pressure on the program as a whole. Here you will find recommendations for constructing systems and procedures that give our most challenging students the best chance for success.

Throughout the book are figures offering advice, charts, and forms that I have come back to repeatedly when puzzling over what approaches might be adapted to the challenging student currently stretching our creativity.

I hope this book helps your school team hang in, learn, grow, and appreciate the hard work they do. I also hope for

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- An increase in support and funding for the staff and programs that hang in with our most challenging students.
- An appreciation of the potential that rests within each student and the capacity to hold onto the hope when they can't.
- A realization that the expectation to educate every child is a monumental task, the complexity of which we do not understand.
- A commitment to storytelling and to constructing a shared meaning from those stories.
- An invitation to all educators to work with our most challenging students so that you can add your stories to our growing body of knowledge and practice.

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1

Toni

Absolutes and Teachable Moments

Schools embody particular minicultures. That is a good thing—when we enter a school, we want to feel that we are in a special place, that we have stepped from the street into an environment that offers students opportunities that they don't experience elsewhere. The confluence of the staff, the community, the history of the program, the physical characteristics of the building and grounds, and the regulations from the government create a unique school culture. That culture, and the special opportunities that culture generates, are secured by the school having predictable rules and expectations, and the adults having predictable emotional responses to student activity. This story centers on a student, Toni, whose needs bring into question which elements of the school's culture are absolute and which can bend.

Challenges for Toni:

- Trauma history
- Substance use
- Learning disabilities and diminished skill set
- History of school failure
- Lack of trust

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- Racial isolation
- Explosive outbursts

Challenges for the adult team:

- Maintaining caring when verbally abused
- Not holding grudges
- Rethinking absolute school rules
- Maintaining school safety
- Being alert for teachable moments
- Carefully measuring responses
- Developing reliable plans
- Acknowledging student emotions and frustrations
- Communicating as a team

The Capacity to Trust

When Toni came to the therapeutic school for her initial intake appointment, she was too scared to be alone with us, and so was accompanied by her state-appointed social worker. Toni was not a likely candidate for success. The toxic combination of her learning disabilities, her many gaps in basic academic skills, her post-traumatic stress disorder, her persistent marijuana smoking, and her difficulty in trusting others might never allow her to take the healthy risks necessary to succeed. But there was something in Toni's willingness to hang in that was compelling. During our initial conversation, she flashed an occasional bright smile and gave serious consideration to what she was hearing. Her testing reports revealed a keen intellect, now muffled by her many difficulties. Most importantly, her relationship with her social worker hinted at a lingering ability to connect; if she could trust one consistently caring adult, she might trust the school staff and the other students in the school community.

Above all else, the foundation of schools that hang in with challenging students is building trusting relationships—relationships

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that allow these often overwhelmed young people to try again. Atwool (2006) notes that for students like Toni, success in school will be "unlikely to develop . . . without a relationship with at least one . . . adult in which they feel worthy and loveable" (p. 322).

Toni would need from us the fundamentals we provided all of our challenging students—namely, the six essential elements of hanging in shown in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1 **The Six Overarching Elements of Hanging In**

1. *Exquisite respectfulness:* All students, parents, and educators must be treated with the greatest degree of human dignity and respect, in every room, every activity, and every interaction. This is not easy to do, and so exquisite respectfulness is practiced by all. If we should have a bad moment and speak sarcastically, angrily, or impatiently, we get back to the other person (whether teacher, administrator, parent, and especially student) and apologize. Respect is nonnegotiable. If a doctor's credo is "Above all else, do no harm," an educator's is "Above all else, do not shame the student."
2. *Working from student strengths:* For many challenging students, the hard circumstances of their lives have diminished the fullest range and expression of what they might have been able to do. While teaching these students the skills to manage what is hardest for them, we must recognize any and all strengths that can be building blocks of a successful life. Not every student in the world will reach mastery in trigonometry or Latin or essay writing, but all have strengths and talents. Students must experience school as a generative environment. The sum total of a day in school should not be an overwhelming reminder of what students cannot do. Ensure that every student has a school adult or activity that connects them to their best possible selves.
3. *Opportunity for student reflection:* "Aha" moments of learning are idiosyncratic. Challenging students come to school with jagged profiles of competencies and experiences. There are many lessons about school and life that challenging students have not been able to grasp *yet*. We should be consistently checking in with challenging students about what they are seeing and understanding. In those moments of conversation with a caring adult, students have the opportunity to crystallize a previously elusive notion, to say in many ways, "Oh, I get it now!"

continued

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Figure 1.1 **The Six Overarching Elements of Hanging In** (*continued*)

4. *Learning from errors:* The path to competency, especially in the social and emotional domain, is filled with missteps. Students will make the same error more than once. We must make sure that consequences for their errors are not damning. Consequences for mistakes (including punishments) should be time-limited and offer a realistic way to regain trust. As much as possible, and as soon as possible after the misstep, offer ways for students to demonstrate and practice the replacement skill.
5. *Allowing multiple interests to inspire diverse solutions:* With challenging students, there is rarely one issue, one stakeholder, one obvious path. The students' struggles affect their educators, their peers, their families, the community at large, and most significantly, their own growth into adulthood. It is important to keep the multiple interests on the table and not get stuck in the trap that, in order to satisfy one interest, the others must be sacrificed. The school community will grow by developing a rich menu of strategies.
6. *Working as a team:* No one effectively does the work of teaching challenging students alone for very long. Teachers and professional staff must have multiple venues to vent, ask for advice, brainstorm strategies, and celebrate successes. All educators bring to the work the experiences and skills that may be critical to the success of a single student and to the growth of the programs—make sure that meetings and other forms of communication access the full range of team input. Everyone who works primarily with challenging students should have an ally, a supportive supervisor, a coach.

Toni Reacts

When Toni started at our school, She found the culture created by our six overarching elements disconcerting. As with many students on the verge of dropping out of school completely, she had tried a year or two of public high school and failed to bear up to its anonymity, stress, and the intense social cauldron. Toni often reacted explosively to situations she found stressful or scary. She could look

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menacing and swear like a sailor. This had gotten her into a lot of trouble at the public high school. At our school, no matter what Toni might say or do (in her case, academically more often *not* do), she was never shamed. Within such an emotionally safe setting, students have a shot at being reacquainted with their strengths and hopes. But could Toni?

Often we thought not. Like other students who have had hard lives, she experienced the staff's boundless friendliness as unsettling. "You all are too nice. I don't like you all saying hello to me every day." She might have been more comfortable if teachers held grudges and rejected her when she stomped away, muttering curses at them on those rough days when we would have to send her home early because she was refusing to comply with any school rules. Instead, the next day the teachers greeted her warmly, ready to start over on whatever lesson had scared her away the day before.

Toni faced other obstacles. She struggled with feeling isolated. Coming from a black and Latino family, she said, "I'm not used to being around so many white people. My perfect school would be all black." She struggled with homework, with required reading, and with math. But her willpower was enormous, and she had an innate ability to discern people's feelings and to attract people to her. She tested everyone with her abrasive language, impatience, her dark moods, and her approach-and-avoidance behavior when asking for help. For instance, a day after Toni flashed us her warm smile and showed us a dance step to a song we had never heard before, she'd burst into class with headphones on, singing loudly, and when asked to put the headphones away and settle into the task at hand, she'd explode: "This fucking school and its fucking rules. You just want to give students shit all day, don't you?"

Putting Behaviors in Categories

One of the key approaches for hanging in with students who display such unpredictable and explosive behaviors as Toni's is to

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identify which behaviors demand a rigidly consistent response and which behaviors suggest a more nuanced and context-specific response. Ross Greene (1998), in his excellent book *The Explosive Child*, describes three categories of behavior that we used to sift Toni's typical outbursts and to plan our responses: behaviors that are not to be tolerated, behaviors that the school can ignore, and behaviors we choose to respond to as teachable moments.

At one extreme are *behaviors that are not to be tolerated*, mostly because these behaviors threaten the safety or the integrity of the community. In this category for Toni was aggressively swearing at someone. Toni would be sent home for the remainder of the day if she was verbally abusive. The school team all knew the steps to take when Toni displayed intolerable behaviors. No one cherished the expectation to confront her at those times, but knowing that the teachers had each other's backs, and that the administration would follow through without any question, gave each one the strength to set that unwavering limit.

At the other extreme are *behaviors that the school can ignore*, even if other schools or programs wouldn't. Toni was allowed to wear hats and do-rags; in fact, the realization that such articles of clothing for her were not at all gang related but a safe and creative aspect of her sense of self led the school to reexamine all of its policies toward headgear. What Toni wore on her head provided opportunities for conversation and appreciation of her style. Her hats never interrupted the business of learning. Whether or not she wore a hat had no impact on the school's functioning.

Between the extremes of absolute rule adherence and ignoring is the largest category of behavior, those *behaviors we choose to respond to as teachable moments*. These behaviors occur in the vast gray area of context and relationships and so can be molded into opportunities to learn and grow. For Toni, these moments could be crucial in shaping her emerging capacity for self-control. When Toni turned away from teachers and muttered loudly, when she initially refused to follow a direction, when she slammed a book on her desk

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and declared the work to be "the stupidest thing I have ever been asked to do," the teachers did not have to immediately censure her. They did not ignore the behaviors; to do so would give Toni a false sense of how the world operated. Instead, they gauged each situation in choosing their responses: Toni's overall mood that day, the volatility of the peer group, their own relationships with Toni, the time available to engage with her. Through experience, teachers developed a handful of guidelines for addressing these behaviors; their accumulated wisdom from the decisions they made and the small successes with Toni were critical in Toni's development.

What worked best for Toni was when teachers gave her a quiet minute after her outbursts. The teachers stood close enough to demonstrate attention but not so close as to trigger Toni's fears. When they gauged that the moment was right, the teachers simply acknowledged and put into words what Toni was feeling: "Wow, that made you upset." The message to Toni was that the school was strong enough to weather her emotions. She might glare back, mutter more, walk farther away, but the teachers did not add to her escalating reactions. They let her safely simmer down. In various ways, again context dependent, the teachers would say, "Let's try that again, OK?" The goal was to communicate that she could move on, and that the staff would not hold grudges. Tomlinson (2012) describes this staff approach as "half pit bull and half Mother Theresa" (p. 88). It was one of Toni's strengths that she could recognize those attitudes in the adults.

We developed a form for sorting student behaviors into the three categories and deciding on responses. Figure 1.2 shows this form, which we call the "Specific Behavior Plan," filled out for Toni. The plan reflects shared team experiences and perspectives, and represents a team consensus for how to respond. The form is a tool, not a set rule book, and should be reviewed and adjusted as the team gains new insights and the student develops new skills.

The team also asked Toni to reflect on her own behavior, identifying situations that upset her, ways she might avoid these

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situations, and how she might keep calm if she started to get upset. Toni and staff agreed on an escape plan for her, a safe place in the school where she could go to calm down if she lost, or was about to lose, control. Figure 1.3 is Toni's "Get Me Out of Trouble Plan."

The Team Holds the Power

There is no way to overestimate the critical importance of adult teamwork and communication when we have challenging students like Toni. In isolation, teachers can feel like the last soldier on the battlefield, defending modern civilization against the potential chaos of a world filled with unruly teenagers. Toni was seen as one of those chaos-threatening students. She would often display her bad behavior in front of a lone teacher, provoking all of the consequences the adult had available. As a teacher once admitted to me when reflecting on his own emotional buildup and fear of losing control, which had propelled him to become more harshly punitive than he even expected he could be: "Not on my watch were we going to lose the battle!" When teachers have time to collaborate with each other and administrators, the metaphor of war can be put aside, and we can return to the boundless terrain of education.

The shift for Toni's teachers was to see her as a sad and scared person, who had few tools at her disposal, ineffectively trying to get through her day. In her emotionally charged state, Toni did not yet have the cognitive capacity to modulate her behavior; the arousal process took her from stimulus to action in a short period of time (Siegel, 1999). She stomped away from teachers in shame from what she had just said and fear of what might next come out of her mouth.

In contrast, the adults were an organized team, with all the institutional power at our fingertips. With our collective resources, the adults would never lose. Toni's team learned to be like the black-belt martial artists whose strength and training allow them to stay calm in a conflict, knowing that they hold a huge advantage. They rarely if ever need to actually fight; instead, they can educate. Mendler (2012)

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Figure 1.2 Specific Behavior Plan

Behaviors that we are responding to as teachable moments:

- Toni shouts out when work is assigned.

What the teacher says or does to shape new behavior:

- Leave Toni alone for a few seconds.
- Say, "Can you tell me in a quiet voice what is hard about this?"

What student can be expected to do when given a prompt:

- Remain silent; no need to talk to teacher immediately.
- Ask for more time to cool off.
- Ask to go to her safe place.
- Talk to the teacher quietly.

Behaviors that demand one consistent response:

- Toni swears aggressively or is verbally abusive.

What the teacher says or does to interrupt behavior:

- "Toni, it is time to go to your safe area."

What is expected of student:

- To go to her safe area as quietly as she can.

Staff who must be contacted:

- The assistant principal, who will meet Toni at her safe area or come to the room and communicate to her the consequences to her actions once she de-escalates.

Behaviors that we are ignoring:

- Toni mutters under her breath.
- Toni puts herself down verbally.
- Toni scowls.
- Toni disregards headgear rule.

notes: "The only way to effectively manage provocative moments is for you, the classroom leader, to stay calm" (p. 49). Toni's teachers stayed cool in the moment, knowing that they worked as a team, and their calm gave Toni the time and space to try again. For Toni's teachers, maintaining calm was supported by four important conditions:

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Figure 1.3 Get Me Out of Trouble Plan

Name: Toni

These things can really make me upset:

- Staff standing too close to me
- Not giving me time to stop doing one thing before I have to do another
- Feeling stupid

Ways I can avoid the things that upset me:

- Don't go into class if I am already pissed off
- Do my homework in study hall

Ways I can keep calm when things are starting to upset me:

- Ask to be left alone ("I want to be alone now")
- Listen to music

My escape plan—where I go in school to be safe when all else fails:

- Outside Sandy's office

1. They knew what the absolutes were and what steps would be taken in those situations.
2. They knew they had the latitude and flexibility to work with Toni in situations that were not absolute and that they would not be second-guessed. This assurance gave them the security to discuss how they might nudge Toni's learning even more the next time they were in a similar situation.
3. They knew they could review as a team Toni's specific behavior plan, and its lists of absolute, ignored, and teaching moment behaviors, which evolved as Toni herself developed a broader array of coping skills.
4. They knew that supporting Toni's emotional development was often going to take precedence over developing any particular academic skill. It was not yet time to judge the team's success based on Toni's standardized test scores.

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Toni Responds to Our Holding the Hope

We recognized Toni's breakthroughs mostly in retrospect; each was the result of Toni coming back to school day after day and of the staff holding onto the hope. Sandy, her therapist at school, could look Toni in the eye and talk to her in a direct language rarely practiced in social work schools. For instance, Sandy might say, "It's not okay that you dumped all your shit on that teacher." Sandy's wording connected Toni directly to her own emotions because it was the wording Toni used to talk to herself. In those moments, Toni felt heard and understood. After a year and a half, Toni finally allowed her math teacher to show her the steps of long division. One day, when she had dropped all of her books and folders in the hallway, Phillip, a teacher with blonde hair and bright blue eyes, set aside his own pile of papers to help Toni with hers, and she said, "That was the nicest thing anyone could have done for me." When it came time for writing her senior thesis paper, the school offered Toni the tutorial support of Meg, a soft-spoken Irish girl from the suburbs, and Toni accepted. The two of them sat in the cafeteria, finding a common language to navigate through the 75 note cards and pages of bibliography required to graduate.

As a school administrator, my own relationship with Toni had always been tenuous. More than once, I was the target of her wrath. I watched from afar as she learned to write book reports, went to a job training program off-campus, cochaired the school's weekly community meeting, and truly became a citizen, someone who would contribute, not only to our school, but to the larger community. In many ways, she changed more than any student I have known in my 30 years in the business. One day, in the middle of her senior year, we were walking onto the campus together. I realized I was jealous of the many staff and students who were now in her circle of trust and warm regard. I decided to take a small risk and let her know how much I admired her efforts. I caught up with her and said, "Toni, you have done an amazing job of turning around your life." There was a pause. She eyed me for a moment and then exclaimed in her most

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boisterous voice, a voice that still echoes in all of our memories, "It's about time, huh?!"

Hanging-In Recommendations and Considerations for Individual Students

1. *Create schedules that maximize students' contact with the adults who are having success building their trust.* Even if it appears to be giving these students something special that they have not yet earned, this extra contact is what they need. Each student has a different capacity to develop trust.
2. *Let staff who have established trust communicate to the student the school's expectations*—what are the most valuable and guarded elements of the school's culture?
3. *Help each student develop simple coping tools for times of heightened emotions* (going to a special quiet part of the school, taking a walk on grounds, controlled breathing). Make a plan for what the student should do in stressful situations. (See Figure 1.3 for a sample plan.)
4. *Work with students to develop a signal for when they need to escape to a designated quiet place.* Something simple like three fingers in the air can be a way of asking for permission to go without having to give an explanation in the moment. Most students who challenge us with eruptions the way Toni did need escapes before they make things worse. We know they cannot change their behaviors overnight. We want to find ways those behaviors have the least effect on the school's functioning.
5. *Don't enforce consequences immediately when de-escalating the situation with a student.* Almost always, the first task with challenging students who are having an outburst is to support them in calming down. Give these students options for correcting themselves or cooling off, if the momentary behavior does not undermine the safety or culture of the school.

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6. *Build in time and positive feedback for students' individual accomplishments.* Challenging students like Toni come into school way behind the pack in feeling good about themselves, so don't worry about spoiling them with compliments—that's an unlikely outcome. More likely, your compliments will build relationships that can allow you to tell the truth about all their behaviors.
7. *Don't stop giving sincere compliments when the student seems to be rejecting you*—you are being tested to see if you can hold up to a bit of rejection. Some students will reject you before you can reject them. Don't let their attitude change your attitude of appreciation. They have to know that *you* believe that they can be successful in the culture.

Hanging-In Recommendations and Considerations for the Adult Team

1. *Storytelling:* Share what student you hung in with for the longest time before you began to achieve academic success. What were the pivotal moments? Share what student you hung in with for the longest time before there was a level of trust. What helped you hang in through that time? What were the pivotal moments?
2. *Review all behaviors that require absolute and unvarying responses.* As teachers we make so many complex decisions every day; having clarity about the absolute behaviors we must address reduces the burden of decision making.
3. *Develop specific behavior response plans for challenging students.* (See Figure 1.2 for a sample plan.) Consider which student behaviors might be responded to as teachable moments, based on the context and the time available, and which might be safely ignored. Share results of using the plan and adjust accordingly.

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Hanging-In Recommendations and Considerations for Administrators

1. *Identify places where students who are escalating can calm down.* These places should be easily accessed; a student who in the moment has very little ability to calmly ask for help should not have to navigate a complex set of permissions to get where they can recover. Make it easy. The school culture will develop its capacity for safety and compassion.
2. *Develop structures that allow staff who are working closely with challenging students to communicate their progress.* Toni's team shared with each other her small successes and evolving abilities. They were all abreast of what had been tried and what would be the next step to target. Teams need time to meet, or technology, to share the latest news.
3. *Review each year the list of absolute rules and consequences and keep them to a minimum.* Certain rules, followed in lockstep, are critical to maintain the school's culture, but sometimes a school's rules have not been reviewed for years and just keep getting reprinted in the handbook. In many schools, teachers arbitrarily treat a lot of rules as guidelines, because the rules are not the best practice in the moment. The professional culture of a school can erode when teachers feel compelled to go their own way in support of a needy student. Administrators can unite a staff around a smaller set of absolute rules—easier to remember, easier to enforce, easier to supervise—and a lot of reasonable guidelines.

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About the Author

Photo: Mark Jacobson

Jeffrey Benson has worked in almost every school context in his 35 years of experience in education: as a teacher in elementary, middle, and high schools; as an instructor in undergraduate and graduate programs; and as an administrator in day and residential schools. He has studied and worked side by side with national leaders in the fields of special education, learning theory, trauma and addiction, school reform, adult development, and conflict resolution. He has been a consultant to public and private schools, mentored teachers and principals in varied school settings, and has written on many school-based issues. The core of Jeffrey Benson's work is in understanding how people learn—the starting point for everything that schools should do. He can be reached via e-mail at JeffreyBenson@LeadersAndLearners.org; his Twitter handle is @JeffreyBenson61.

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