

## TURN AND TALK

### Meena Srinivasan on Mindful School Leadership



**Meena Srinivasan is the executive director of Transformative Educational Leadership, a program that integrates training in leadership, equity, SEL, and mindfulness. She has also worked with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to implement SEL programming in the Oakland Unified School District. Srinivasan is the author of *Teach, Breathe, Learn: Mindfulness In and Out of the Classroom* (Parallax Press, 2014) and *SEL Every Day: Integrating SEL with Instruction in Secondary Classrooms* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).**

**Paraphrasing peace activist and Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, you've said "The greatest gift we can offer others is our presence." What are the qualities of a "present" school leader?**

To be present, we have to pay attention in real time to what is unfolding internally and externally. But our attention has to be infused with what I call the four Cs: compassion, connectedness, curiosity, and care. They remind me of the late, great Maya Angelou, who felt that at all times, we are unconsciously asking each other: *Do you see me? Do you care that I am here?* A principal who brings those four Cs into their present-moment attention, can truly show up for others.

**So mindfulness is more than a solitary act?**

I define mindfulness as paying attention to our inner and outer life as it unfolds while being grounded in our body, our breathing, and our senses so that our mind can settle and we can cultivate a curious,

open-hearted presence and awareness of interbeing. This term *interbeing* was coined by Thich Nhat Hanh, who is a teacher of mine. Interbeing for me is really the foundation of mindfulness practice. It's something that has gotten lost in the modern mindfulness world. Interbeing is the interdependence of all things to other things. I really believe that right now in our dual pandemic context, we need to practice mindfulness with this deep sense of interbeing—which is a shift to a more transformational, connected, relational way of being. This is especially important for leadership.

**Why should principals make time for mindfulness?**

Mindfulness isn't *another thing* you have to do on top of everything else. It's really the foundation of being an effective leader. One of my teachers, Larry Ward, who is a senior student of Thich Nhat Hanh, said that if you're a revolutionary at heart (and *you are* if you're in this work of educational leadership), you can live like a comet—be a brilliant light and vanish quickly. Or you can be like the sun,

always returning. So attending to our inner work enables us to continue to return like the sun. Transforming our educational system requires leaders to have a long view: It isn't possible with comets. We must *all* be like the sun.

**How might leaders incorporate "mindful moments" during the day?**

There's the formal practice of mindfulness where maybe you start with five minutes in the morning, either focusing on sensations in your body or focusing on your breathing. Then there's the informal practice, which I feel is the real practice. Because if those 5 minutes, or those 10 minutes, or those 20 minutes don't spill over into the rest of your day, then what's the point? You can practice informal mindfulness anytime, anywhere, with anyone. For example, when I was in the classroom, I'd practice mindful breathing during "wait time."

I'd love to offer three practical strategies, the "three Ts," for informal practice that teachers and leaders can employ during the day: tea time, transitional time, and toilet time. Tea time—or maybe you're a coffee drinker—is making a commitment to take a few breaths before you drink your beverage and then to truly taste it. You can add the *interbeing* element to this practice by paying attention to the infinite causes and conditions that resulted in that tea or coffee being there—from the sun and the soil that grew the beans, to the workers in the coffee or tea plantation that harvested them. The second "T" is transitional time. This is all the time we spend waiting—to be admitted into a Zoom call, for a staff meeting to begin, or to use the copy machine at school. Now imagine if we could spend that time just coming back to our breath and our body. Embracing what's arising. Caring for ourselves with curiosity

and kindness. The third “T” is toilet time. When I was a classroom teacher and district leader, the bathroom was the only place I was alone during the day. It’s a perfect opportunity to practice mindfulness as it instantly brings us back into our bodies.

### **Life is hard right now for many educators. How can school leaders and teachers practice self-compassion?**

I think self-compassion is key, especially when you’re in a service profession. Self-compassion means being warm and understanding toward yourself when you suffer rather than ignoring what’s arising or engaging in self-criticism. There are two practices that can help cultivate self-compassion. The first is an affectionate breathing practice—really bringing this quality of affection to mindful breathing. (See my guided meditation on the Insight Timer app.) The second is a simple reflection: *How would you treat a friend?* When a good friend of yours is going through

a tough time, how would you speak to that friend? Now notice what’s different when you think about how you would speak to yourself. I invite you to commit to treating yourself like a good friend.

### **How can mindfulness help principals lead with grace and compassion?**

One of the greatest lessons I learned from Thich Nhat Hanh is that our inner transformation ultimately has to be in service of societal transformation. I was listening to an interview with him once, and he was asked “How do you change what you teach depending on where you are?” He said, “I just really try to understand the suffering of those who I’m going to be with.”

I think for those of us who are working in schools, one of the most powerful ways in which we can offer compassion to others is seeing our students, colleagues, and the parents of our students as we see ourselves. That increases compassion, altruism, and prosocial behavior—essential qualities for a thriving school com-

munity. I would say in preparation for your classes, faculty meetings, parent conferences, or any type of collaboration to try to put yourself in the shoes of others. These sentence stems can make this practice accessible:

■ Breathing in, I see myself as the parent of [insert student’s name]. Breathing out, I recognize that we’re a team and we want the best for [insert student’s name].

■ Breathing in I see myself as [insert student’s name]. Breathing out, I recognize that [insert student’s name] wants to be seen, heard, and valued.

■ Breathing in, I see myself as [insert colleague’s name]. Breathing out, I recognize that [insert colleague’s name] wants the best for their students.

Those scripts can help us make that shift from judgment to a more curious, compassionate stance.

—Sarah McKibben

*Editors’ note:* This interview has been edited for space.

## **SCHOOL TOOL**

### **Mental Health Resources for Educators**

■ A fact sheet “Black and African American Communities and Mental Health” created by Mental Health America ([www.mhanational.org/issues/black-and-african-american-communities-and-mental-health](http://www.mhanational.org/issues/black-and-african-american-communities-and-mental-health)) gives a good overview and statistics on mental health and mental illness among Black Americans, including exploring barriers that often surface for Black Americans seeking treatment. There are links to info on bipolar disorder and depression in this community and a list (with links) of mental health resources—including free trainings and webinars, directories of therapists, and sources of financial help.

■ School leaders looking to give teachers information on compassion fatigue should look at the “Self-Care for Educators” fact sheet from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/self\\_care\\_for\\_educators.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/self_care_for_educators.pdf)

■ Teach.com’s “50 Resources to Support the Mental Health of Teachers and School Staff” (<https://bit.ly/3mu11yU>) links to sources of help: mental health support for educators (including virtual gatherings), and lists of websites, podcasts, etc. on teacher wellness.