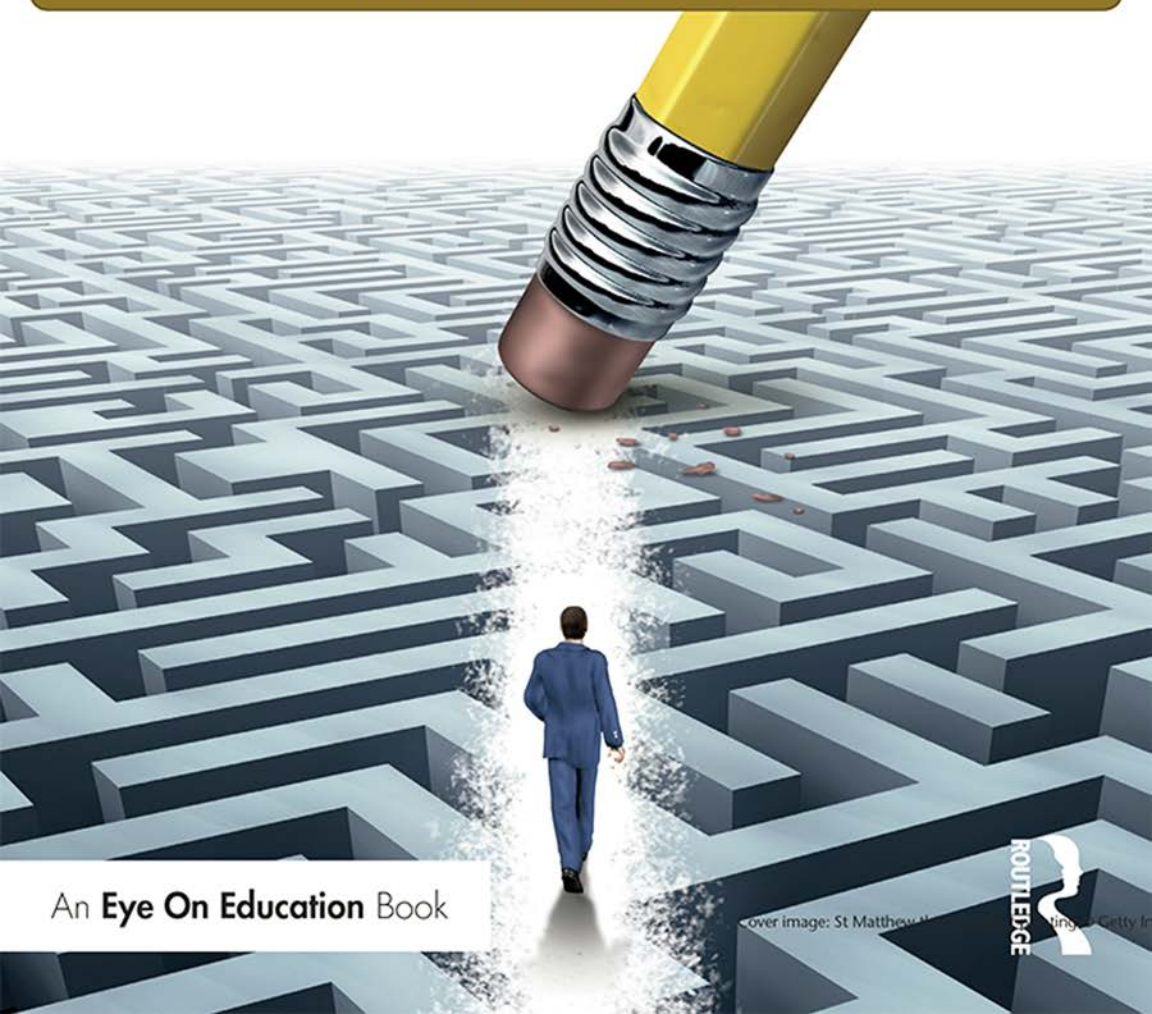


TODD WHITAKER

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT TEACHERS

THIRD EDITION



An **Eye On Education** Book

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ROUTLEDGE


DEALING WITH DIFFICULT TEACHERS

THIRD EDITION

Todd Whitaker

This bestselling book provides tips and strategies to help school leaders improve, neutralize, or eliminate resistant and negative teachers. Learn how to handle staff members who

- ◆ gossip in the teachers' lounge
- ◆ consistently say "it won't work" when any new idea is suggested
- ◆ send an excessive number of students to your office for disciplinary reasons
- ◆ undermine your efforts toward school improvement
- ◆ negatively influence other staff members

New to the third edition: A special section called "Strategy Session," designed to help you figure out whether the challenging staff members are unaware of the effects of their actions or whether they are intentionally working against the school and, more importantly, the students. You'll learn how to make that determination and what to do about it.

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Recruiting, Retaining, and Mentoring the Best

Todd Whitaker and Douglas Fiore

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THIRD EDITION

Todd Whitaker

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About the Author

Dr. Todd Whitaker has been fortunate to be able to blend his passion with his career. Recognized as a leading presenter in the field of education, his message about the importance of teaching has resonated with hundreds of thousands of educators around the world. Todd is Professor of Educational Leadership at Indiana State University in Terre Haute, Indiana, and he has spent his life pursuing his love of education by researching and studying effective teachers and principals.

Prior to moving into higher education he was a math teacher and basketball coach in Missouri. Todd then served as a principal at the middle school, junior high, and high school levels. He was also a middle school coordinator in charge of staffing, curriculum, and technology for the opening of new middle schools.

One of the nation's leading authorities on staff motivation, teacher leadership, and principal effectiveness, Todd has written 30 books, including the national bestseller, *What Great Teachers Do Differently*. Other titles include: *Shifting The Monkey*, *Teaching Matters*, *Great Quotes for Great Educators*, *What Great Principals Do Differently*, *Motivating and Inspiring Teachers*, and *Dealing With Difficult Parents*.

Todd is married to Beth, also a former teacher and principal, who is Professor of Elementary Education at Indiana State University. They are the parents of three children: Katherine, Madeline, and Harrison.

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Preface

My interest in writing this book is the result of three different occurrences in my educational career. The first happened during my first year of teaching. Like most educators, I chose the field because of the chance to have a positive impact on the lives of young people. I started my career in a rural K–12 school, where I taught business education, mathematics, and where I served as coach. I felt that I was a fine teacher, and I was working to have a positive impact on the students and community. However, just down the hall was a teacher who yelled, humiliated students, and was sarcastic with her students on a regular basis. I thought if I could do something about her treatment of students, then that improvement could be more valuable than anything I might accomplish in my own classroom. Thus, I became a principal.

The second experience came when I became the assistant principal, then principal, of a school that employed some marginal (a kind word) staff members. Many of these teachers had been in education, and in this school, for a number of years. Actually, I was ashamed to have students go into the classrooms of some of the faculty. In addition, whenever we attempted to improve our school, we had faculty who chimed in with statements such as, “It didn’t work back in ‘86; it won’t work now!” Unfortunately many staff followed their lead. I knew that for our school to be outstanding, something had to be done to make the teaching staff more effective *and* at the same time develop a culture and climate in the school that supported positive change among all staff.

The third factor, which supports the approaches that follow, was that I was fortunate to have an outstanding assistant principal in one of the schools where I was principal. In addition to low staff morale in the school, there were several difficult teachers in the building. Together, my assistant principal and I implemented many of the approaches that are described in this book. We were fortunate to have success in altering

the climate of the school. We were also able to generate some needed turnover with some of our most difficult and negative teachers. Then, as often happens with great assistant principals, he was given his own school. His school was in need of effective leadership and had several difficult staff members. As a new principal in a challenging setting, he was able to implement some of the same concepts we had developed together. This parallel success led to the further development of these approaches, which are non-confrontational in style and can be implemented in any school immediately. Since the time of those experiences, having worked with numerous schools, I have been able to verify that the approaches that worked in my schools work in all schools.

This book is designed to be a practitioner-oriented resource that principals can use to improve their school by helping them to work effectively with their most difficult teachers.

Todd Whitaker, Ph.D.
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Introduction to the First Edition

I have written this book for a very simple reason: Education is the single most important profession that there is. No other profession has the same impact on the future of society than one in education. This love for children and for schools was my driving force behind *Dealing with Difficult Teachers*.

It is important for the reader to understand that I do not know of any school administrator anywhere who values teachers more than I do. I know that the key to a great school is an outstanding teaching staff. However, there is one group of individuals that I value even more than teachers—the students. The students are the reason for which I am writing this book. It is crucial to me that every student be treated in an appropriate, caring manner each day at school. For many students, school is the highlight of their day, and the educators they come in contact with are the primary determinants of what kind of a day each day will be. Great educators can make students' days great; negative and ineffective educators can demoralize students and colleagues. Difficult teachers can ruin the day.

Another important element in dealing with difficult teachers is the belief that adults determine how they are going to behave and interact with others every day. Students may not have the level of maturity to be as responsible as adults for their behavior and for some of the choices that they make. Because education is so important, however, it is critical that each adult who comes in contact with students has a positive and productive manner of treating them.

One of our great challenges as principals is moving past the assumption that everyone is in the field of education for the same reason we are—to do what is best for the children in our school. We should always be open to that hope and expectation, but for whatever reason, we may find ourselves facing

people whose current behavior is not in the best interest of the students. One of the most challenging tasks principals face in dealing with difficult teachers is moving out of the natural nurturing role. Principals are caring people in a profession that requires this approach. If, in our organization, we have other adults who choose not to behave with the best interests of children in mind, then we have to make every effort to alter the behaviors of the staff members or remove them from working with students.

This book is not designed to be a first step. It was developed to assist the principal when all previous attempts have not been successful. It is geared toward our most challenging faculty. The practices included are not designed for the new teacher who is struggling a little with classroom management, nor are the practices intended for the teacher who is pretty effective, but whom you wish would be a little more innovative. Although some of these concepts will apply, this book is designed for the most frustrating, resistant, ineffective, and negative staff in the school. Remember, nobody likes to deal with these individuals, but the good principals do and do so effectively. It is also critical for the principal to keep an open mind regarding improvement versus perfection. As embarrassing as it is to admit, if most difficult teachers would only try a little bit more or improve just a fair amount, they would make a big difference in the school. They do not have to become the best teachers in order for the school to improve. They just need to discontinue being the worst. This is not where we eventually want to be, but it is important to be aware continually that any positive growth is movement in the right direction.

This book is not about the formal evaluation process. As principals are well aware, the evaluation process is only part of improving staff performance. Moreover, the formal evaluation process is often limited in effectiveness by the forms, paperwork, and even contractual guidelines. There are several other resources available to assist with this facet of leadership. Instead, this work applies to all 180 days of the school year in ways that are much less cumbersome and limiting in nature.

No strategy in this book is easy. We have solved the easy problems. Effectively leading people is never easy. This is particularly true with our most difficult staff. There is not a principal around who wants to deal with the most challenging staff members. No one looks forward to it.

We can resolve glitches in our schedule. Determining the most efficient way to operate the lunch lines can eventually be achieved in every school. However, any time you are dealing with people, it is never easy. Many approaches in this book are simple to understand, but they take much resolve on the part of the building principal to apply. Dealing with difficult teachers is never easy. Doing what is best for kids is often not easy either. Great principals somehow find a way to do both.

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Introduction to the Second Edition

It is exciting to be writing a second edition of this book. The reaction to the first edition has been remarkable and overwhelming. Interestingly, I chose *Dealing with Difficult Teachers* as my first book for two reasons. One of them was that there seemed to be few resources on the topic itself. There are books on evaluation, but that is not the same issue. We cannot wait for a negative staff member's three-year evaluation for them to change. It is essential that they improve their behavior more quickly. Additionally, if the principal is documenting a teacher's poor performance, then the principal is working. Instead, it is important that the difficult teacher be the one doing the work.

The lack of information regarding improving challenging staff members is surprising because the problem is so common. Almost every school has teachers who work against school improvement and do not have students as their central focus. Yet evidence in achieving change in the behavior of the troubled teachers is not very common. When a principal can successfully work with the most difficult staff members and concurrently increase his or her own credibility with the rest of the staff members, then the principal has probably solved the most challenging task a building administrator can face. If a school leader can master this one, then the rest should be simple.

The other reaction that has been so positive is from teachers—not the difficult ones, but from all of their peers. Good teachers are just as troubled and ashamed of their difficult colleagues as principals are. And they have not had a resource to utilize either. I have received tremendous positive feedback from teachers who have found the book beneficial. Because we avoid power struggles in our solutions, the majority of the

approaches are applicable to working with peers and even difficult supervisors! Principals have discovered the positive result of sharing the book with staff members instead of hiding the book in a desk drawer. After all, many of our teachers have worked with these troubled teachers much longer than we have.

The second edition specifically addresses some of the issues that educators most frequently raise when they come to one of my workshops on this topic. The new four-chapter section (Part 4) focuses on communicating with the difficult teacher. Specific issues include strategies that work most effectively when addressing and communicating with difficult teachers regarding their behavior. In other words, when should I approach the teacher? Is the timing a factor in attempting to change negative behavior? Are there more effective questioning strategies? We also discuss additional methods to ensure that we are gaining credibility with the many positive and productive teachers in our school. These key teachers will ultimately determine just how far our school will go.

I appreciate all the kind words and feedback that you have shared regarding the effectiveness of the strategies in *Dealing with Difficult Teachers*. I am glad that you have found them to be beneficial in your schools. After speaking to a group of educators recently, a teacher passed me a note that she carries with her. The note said, "An incompetent teacher is much worse than an incompetent surgeon, because an incompetent surgeon only cuts up one person at a time." The hurt that a poor teacher can inflict on our students is immeasurable. It is up to the principal to have a positive impact on the situation. When you make a difference in your school you make a difference in children's lives. I want to personally thank you for your dedication to making your schools a better place for the teachers and for the students.

Introduction to the Third Edition

In working with schools around the world, I've noticed some things individual buildings have in common. They all have many teachers who are truly exceptional educators. These people are so dedicated and caring that you get excited just being around them. There is a real core of professional and hard-working teachers who regularly put the needs of students ahead of themselves. But sadly, the vast majority of schools also seem to have a couple of teachers who ruin the day for everyone. Students do not want to be around them. Parents request not to have them. And their colleagues dread interacting with them. They literally are a ball and chain on the morale of the school. These few individuals damage the credibility of the entire school and to some degree even education as a whole.

There is a push in many states to improve the teacher evaluation process. Though this may be one step in the right direction, it is limited in its effectiveness because it doesn't address how to deal with the most negative and challenging adults in a school. This "improvement gap" is the reason I wanted to add a new section to the book, *Dealing with Difficult Teachers*.

The new section for the third edition is titled "Strategy Session." Its purpose is to help you determine whether the challenging staff members are unaware/unknowledgeable about the effects of their actions or whether they are intentionally working against the school and, more importantly, the students. Once you determine this, then you can have the staff members improve or depart. Improvement should be the first option, but if the teachers do not want to head down that path, then their having to leave becomes the only choice left. The process you can use to enable this to occur is mapped out in the new chapters.

Chapter 24 is designed to give you the confidence to know whether your most challenging staff members are intentionally doing harm or are naïve or unaware of what they are doing and how they are being received. Establishing expectations and teaching adults what is right and wrong often will, by itself, improve the behavior. However, in certain situations, this alone is not enough.

It is also essential to identify how harmful certain actions are on the culture and climate of a school (Chapter 25). Negative occurrences that have been going on for years in most, if not all schools, can really damage the psyche of the most caring and positive teachers. Recognizing these bad influences and “calling them out” through a preventative teaching approach can immediately improve your setting.

However, it is also true that there are a couple of people who may just be more mean spirited in their approach. The third new chapter, “Chapter 26: Action Plan,” is filled with specific things that a building leader can and should do to bring about an immediate change to the dynamics of a school, by altering the behavior of the most negative staff members and establishing the positive majority as the biggest influencers in the school setting.

The fourth new chapter, Chapter 27, is a reminder of the importance of the leader in all of this. If you as a leader do not assume responsibility, then the power of a few negative people can become insurmountable. Understand that it is up to you. The influence you carry is immeasurable and invaluable.

If you want your most challenging staff members to improve or else look for a less significant profession, then you must know exactly what to do, what to say, and how to say it. This book has the answers. Every student deserves to have caring and effective teachers. Every student deserves to have a school leader who will ensure he or she gets those teachers.

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Part 1

The Principal and the Difficult Teacher

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