

STATEMENTS SUPPORTING RELATIONAL WISDOM TRAINING IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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RUSS FAGG, RETIRED DISTRICT JUDGE

I have been an attorney for thirty-nine years and served as a District Court Judge in Billings, Montana, for twenty-two years. During my time on the bench, I handled approximately 25,000 cases covering a wide spectrum of issues, including commercial, employment, negligence, products liability and criminal causes of action.

Some of the most heart-breaking cases I have dealt with involved divorce and custody battles and juvenile criminal matters. One common factor I saw in almost of these cases was a lack of emotional intelligence and conflict resolution skills, which led to ongoing cycles of conflict, many forms of abuse and in all too many cases, physical violence that scarred people for life. In many situations, it was clear that this was a generational problem. When parents did not know how to deal with conflict constructively, they typically passed their bad habits on to their children.

I have personally completed the emotional intelligence and conflict resolution training provided by RW360. Throughout these courses, I kept thinking of cases I had handled as a judge that would have never landed in my courtroom if families had developed and practiced these skills.

Therefore, I am strongly in favor of any program that could help families in our community develop better relational skills. This type of training could preserve marriages, stop abuse, improve students' academic performance and set them up for success in life. It could also save our community thousands of dollars we are currently spending on judicial and criminal matters.

I would like to add two additional observations.

First, I am currently mediating several legal cases every month. The training I have received through RW360 has improved my ability to discern and manage the emotions that fuel these conflicts and made me more effective in helping clients arrive at mutually agreeable solutions. I wish every attorney could have this training.

Second, I am familiar with RW360's secular training and can attest to the fact that it contains no religious advocacy. Speaking as an attorney, I believe this training complies with all separation of church and state laws and is entirely suitable for use in a public school.

CORLETTE SANDE, RETIRED PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER AND COUNSELOR

I have served for six years as a second-grade teacher and nine years as a counselor in public schools. Although I had great students and co-workers throughout those years, I was no stranger to conflict. I counseled hundreds of students on how to resolve conflicts with one another, with teachers and principals and with their parents. I often found children to be more teachable than some adults, many of whom struggled to overcome life-long dysfunctional relational habits.

In the early years of my career, I used principles I had learned while earning my bachelor's and master's degrees, which prepared me well for my work as a teacher and counselor. But my counseling skills went to an entirely new level when I met Ken Sande, who eventually became my husband. I began to learn and apply conflict resolution principles that he was developing as an attorney-mediator here in Billings. Through his training, I became more skilled at helping students, teachers and parents recognize and manage their emotions, take responsibility for how they had contributed to their conflicts, truly forgive one another and rebuild their relationships.

During my counseling career, I served at several grade schools, middle schools and high schools. As the elementary school teachers saw how the principles I used in counseling were helping individual students, many of them asked me to teach those same principles to their entire classroom so that all their students could begin to learn and practice these concepts.

I recently learned that one of my former students, who is now in her forties, continues to use the principles I taught to her in second-grade and is now teaching them to her own children.

The principles I used to teach and counsel students were 100% compatible with secular public education settings. They did not incorporate any religious language whatsoever. But these principles did help students learn and practice fundamental human values that are vital to any healthy functioning society, including personal responsibility, empathy, kindness, anger management, impulse control and respect for others.

Fundamental values and skills presented in RW360's secular training resources are being taught throughout our nation today can play helpful role in preparing students for constructive adult lives. I sincerely believe that public school students and teachers can only benefit if school systems take advantage of RW360's resources and do all they can to help both teachers and students practice these concepts in their daily lives.

DR. KRIS FRENCH, NEUROLOGIST

I'm a neurologist at Intermountain Health in Billings, Montana.¹ My education and training in neurology has given me a deep understanding of neurodevelopment throughout the lifespan, and I am particularly aware of the neurological challenges that young people experience as they move from adolescence to adulthood.

Various parts of the brain develop at different times, creating a period of vulnerability. A neural circuit in the brain called the **mesolimbic pathway** – a complex system involved in reward and reinforcement – goes through extensive changes during adolescence, which can lead to intense emotions and thrill-seeking behaviors.

At the same time, the **prefrontal cortex**, which is responsible for judgment, self-control, and understanding the consequences of our actions, is not fully developed until our mid-to-late 20s. This uneven brain development is why young people often struggle with impulse control.

With their emotional pathways developing so much faster than their reasoning centers, they have a difficult time even understanding what emotions they're experiencing, let alone how to label them or manage them effectively. They often don't have the neurological wiring to connect their feelings to a logical course of action and the vocabulary to communicate it.

This is where Relational Wisdom comes in. It provides a roadmap for improving a person's emotional intelligence by strengthening the neural circuitry of the brain. Through the development and refinement of key skills, individuals become better equipped to perceive, communicate, and regulate their attitudes and emotions effectively. Relational Wisdom focuses on helping people recognize their emotions, understand them, and respond to them in a constructive manner. By practicing these skills, individuals can enhance their ability to manage emotional challenges and improve their interactions with others.

For example, the posterior default mode network (aka, the PDMN) is a crucial brain system involved in self-reflective thought, social awareness, and empathic responses. When functioning optimally, the PDMN supports our ability to reflect on our experiences, understand our place in social contexts, and maintain emotional balance. However, in conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety, this network is often impaired, leading to significant challenges and emotional dysregulation. Through Relational Wisdom training, neural circuitry is reinforced and improves the ability to actively manage these challenges.

These dynamics go beyond the clinic, helping people de-escalate conflicts and stay calm under pressure. Relational Wisdom gives us all the practical tools to better perceive,

¹ The views expressed in this letter are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Intermountain Health.

understand, and regulate our emotions – and to use that information to improve our relationships with others. Through programs like RW360, young people develop practical skills to regulate and apply the information from their emotions, helping them navigate a challenging stage of brain development.

I've personally gone through RW360's emotional intelligence and conflict resolution training. I believe it's one of the best programs available to help adults and teens improve their relational skills. This training has strengthened my marriage, made me a better parent, and a more compassionate physician. I am committed to making sure my own two children learn these skills early in life.

I believe our whole community would benefit if the teachers and students in our public schools had the chance to learn these skills as well.

WENDY DONAUGH, NURSE PRACTITIONER

I have worked in the nursing field for over twenty years, serving in hospitals and medical offices. I am now a nurse practitioner and currently have my own practice. I have found RW360's training to be invaluable to me in my line of work since I do a lot of counseling with patients.

I find that many of the individuals I serve struggle with issues that have negative effects on their health and lives. I have completed many of the courses offered through RW360 and find the material has helped to provide me with a structural framework to approach emotional and life issues with patients.

I can personally verify that the secular version of RW360's training contains no religious advocacy. This material helps individuals to be aware of self, others and their personal values. There is no question in my mind that this training would be of great value to public school students. Training in emotional intelligence and conflict resolution is extremely important for young people (and adults for that matter). I know this from firsthand experience.

Many of the adults I serve struggle with difficult issues that affect all of life, including personal health. I believe that the mental health crisis facing our country could be greatly reduced if we could equip more people to practice the skills taught through RW360's resources.

These skills are incredibly valuable to students who may be contemplating a career in nursing, which has become an increasingly stressful vocation with a lot of burnouts. Study after study has shown that nurses who have been trained in emotional intelligence are not only more empathetic, compassionate and caring nurses; they are also better able to cope with stress, avoid burnout and serve in their field far longer.

For these reasons, I highly recommend the use of RW360's materials in our schools. The skills this training provides will prove themselves over time as future generations of students show themselves better able to communicate with others, demonstrate empathy and self-control and prevent conflict. Our entire community would benefit if these skills spread in our public schools and become the norm in our families.

MIKE BOTZ, CHEMICAL ENGINEER

I am a chemical engineer. As one who works with many other engineers, I am aware of the struggles many of us have with communicating and relating with others. We tend to be technically strong but often experience frustration when faced with relational tensions. I've experienced this in my work life and at home with my wife and children. The comic strip "Dilbert" isn't entirely unfair in how it portrays the abilities of engineers to communicate.

The type of training offered by RW360 has been quite helpful in improving my ability to understand and manage my emotions, and to understand emotions in the people around me. This understanding came relatively late in life. In my early work life and married life, I often found myself frozen, scared, and unable to express my feelings and emotions. I observed others around me that were much better at communicating, but I assumed that was a natural ability and not something that could be learned. Although my brain will always lean in the logical direction, I discovered that good relational communication is something that can be learned.

It would have been much better for me to learn this at a younger age, and that's why I'm supportive of RW360's training. Relational skills can be learned and should be taught to our young people. These skills will serve them early in life at school, at work, and in the home. There isn't a part of life where good relational skills won't be helpful.

Many of our young men and women in Billings will pursue technical careers. They will learn skills related to analyzing information, solving problems, and making technical decisions. These are great skills for people who are gifted in science, technology, engineering, and math. But our young men and women will be even more successful if they also learn to how understand and manage their emotions and learn how to properly address conflict. This is why I am strongly supportive of using RW360's training throughout our public schools.

ANDY METROKA, RETIRED NAVAL OFFICER AND CORPORATE EXECUTIVE

My career started as an officer onboard a nuclear power submarine in the United States Navy. From there I entered the information technology community, first as an engineer and then as a programmer, a team lead, director of architecture. I am currently the Chief Information Officer and Executive Vice President of Enterprise Operations at Kampgrounds of America headquarters here in Billings.²

I learned about RW360 when I moved to Billings 7 years ago. As I have hired leaders and built teams over the years, I have always focused on emotional intelligence skills as much as, if not more so, than technical skills. I find it much more productive to hire for emotional skills and train for technical skills than to hire for technical skills and train for emotional skills.

Knowing the importance of emotional skills, I invited RW360 to teach a seminar on relational wisdom to the information technology team I was leading at KOA. RW360 used the secular version of that training, which was well suited for a business setting. It contained no religious references whatsoever. My team continues to build on the skills and has become an innovative and productive team as we build and maintain the technology systems used by over 500 campgrounds across the United States and Canada.

I have continued to incorporate relational wisdom in my daily leadership at KOA and have found these concepts to improve my ability to exercise empathy, discern other people's emotions and agendas, and get upstream of conflict. In fact, the more I manage other people, the more I depend on relational skills for success. We compete against many companies around the world, and I believe our competitive advantage comes from the ability to work as an effective team. Yes, technical skills are important. Technical skills combined with effective relationships win the day.

Education has been a priority for both my wife and me. We made sure that a significant part of our children's education centered around critical thinking, leadership, and emotional intelligence. We believe these skills are the reason they were able to graduate from the Air Force Academy, the Naval Academy, the Coast Guard Academy and Montana State University and go on to be leaders in their fields.

I currently serve as the Area Coordinator and Blue and Gold Officer for the Naval Academy here in Montana and regularly interview high school students across our state. I can quickly tell whether I am working with a student who has emotional intelligence skills or lacks these skills. Using RW360's training to teach relational skills to Billings students could change their lives. Since many companies are now using emotional intelligence as part of their recruiting processes, Billings students who have

² The views expressed in this statement are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of KOA.

received RW360's training will have an advantage as they compete for scholarships and jobs after graduation.

One final comment. I spent three and a half years on a nuclear submarine. That involves tight quarters and close relationships, with no opportunity to go out for a walk to let off steam. RW360's training would go a long way to preparing students to navigate and succeed in these types of high stress situations, whether in a nuclear submarine or a fast-paced corporate office or resolving a misunderstanding with their neighbor.