

# PERIL in the PRINCIPALSHIP

Is Your Dream  
Job Becoming  
Your Nightmare?

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PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

*Creating a Culture, Ensuring School Safety*

## I have aspired to be an educator

since I was in first grade. I knew from that young age that I was called to be a teacher! Every afternoon as a child, I would line up my stuffed animals to teach them a recap of my learning that day.

Entering MY first classroom as a teacher was a defining moment and a dream come true. After a few years of

teaching, I wanted to exchange that classroom key for a master key to open up the doors of an entire school and student body. Here I am, 19 years into my administrative career, and I have never been this worried about my profession and my fellow principals. And just like many other principals right now, I find myself wondering about my why, and my future?

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## 'THE REALITY OF MY CAREER'

I've learned a lot in my time as a principal, and one of these things is that no one truly understands what it is like to be a principal, except for other principals. Over the last couple of years, our profession morphed into a job I doubt even retired principals would be able to recognize. Quite honestly, I would even go so far as to say our spouses don't even quite grasp our work, no matter how much we share or what they see.

Yes, they know the hours we work, and they see our passion to be everything to everyone 24 hours a day. My husband sees how tired I am, my tardiness or absence to our own kids' events. He knows our seats

have to be close to an outlet so I can charge my laptop during practices or performances to sneak in some work time. My children know when I finally get home, on many evenings I need a few minutes to just "be," where I don't have to make a decision, fix something, or respond to an electronic device.

I do not want my family to know about all of the room clears, calls for help, and restraints I am often involved with for prolonged periods of time. I don't want them to see all of my mental and physical bruising from dealing with staff, students, and parents. Sometimes, it's unavoidable.

For example, when my husband notices my tossing and turning after a rough day, he will ask "Do you want

to talk?" I usually respond "I'm good," as I sneak out of bed to write down more on my to do list or contemplate about strategies to support my staff and students. Other nights I can't hide it when he finds me dozing on the couch with my laptop open with a half written evaluation summary. He encourages me to finish up to get to sleep. Even though my husband tries, he doesn't quite get the reality of my career.

## A CALLING

As principals, we are required to wear many different hats. We are the counselor, crime fighter, cheerleader, custodian, snack provider, substitute, playground/bus duty covering, morale boosting, disciplinarian, social working, nurse, schedule maker,



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assessment coordinator, technology technician, transportation arranger, greeter, budgeter, safety officer, policy follower, attendance clerk, copy machine fixer, evaluator, instructional leader — all within the first hour of any school day.

This isn't even an exhaustive list.

The amount of on-the-fly decision making we do on a daily basis is extraordinary, even in comparison to an air traffic controller. And yet, we are expected to get it right all the time, all while improving test scores and student achievement. We have become firefighters responding to the intense demands of the job, and there's always an inferno around the corner.

We sacrifice our families, relationships, and life for a calling. But I don't think anyone besides a practicing principal understands how exhausted we are. Many in principal programs are deciding after completing their internship that becoming a principal just isn't worth it. I have heard many principals talk about going back to the classroom — fewer hours, less days to work, less stress, and more time with family. And what about the pay? I heard a principal share she barely makes more than her husband, who is a teacher with his National Board Certification and advises a couple of clubs and sports. When we heard her financial fact, most of us shook our heads as the reality of our choices sank in.

## AT A CROSSROADS

None of us went into education for the money, and I for one celebrated joyfully when my teachers and instructional staff received a large,

very well deserved large pay increase last year. However, we principals, those who “make the big bucks,” did not. In fact, many teachers asked why anyone would want to continue as a principal when the teachers they supervise have such similar salaries.

I was visiting with a former principal who chose to return to the classroom as evaluations, test scores, and expectations drove her away from the principalship. I could not help but notice the spark many of us lose this time of year was alive and well in her. I asked about regrets regarding the move and she said, “Absolutely not, because I love my job again”.

As she walked away, I wondered how many principals still love their job? I pondered if I will look back in a couple of years and wish I had gone back in the classroom.

You see, it feels like the principalship is at the crossroads. More principals are questioning their decision to leave the classroom — thinking back to a simpler time when they could feel successful and manage their workload, personal, and family life. I know a lot of principals now thinking about either returning to the classroom or leaving education all together. The requirements to stay in the field are not for the faint of heart. This job has the ability to strain your relationships and quality of life.

## IS GRIT ENOUGH?

As principals, we must use our voices to ensure people making decisions about educational policy and reform get it right and do what is best for our kids, rather than base their decisions on outdated views from their personal educational experience or unrealistic

expectations for all parties. The architecture of most school buildings remains identical over the last several decades, but the students, standards, and principal expectations have exponentially changed.

Even though I live in an amazingly supportive community and am surrounded by teams of professionals who are in this journey alongside me, I find myself reflecting on the lessons we teach our students about being resilient. All principals are having to dig deep, even when they think they have nothing left to give.

Will grit be enough to sustain us through these challenges? I am not sure. What I do know for sure is the private doubts many principals are wrestling with are much more common than ever before, and maybe there is comfort in knowing they are not alone.

“Continue to be resilient and know every day you show up to work, you make a positive difference in the lives of your students and families.”

Fellow principals (and when I say principals, I mean assistant principals too), I encourage you to use your voice to encourage the change that needs to happen. Our friends at AWSP will tell you to advocate for yourself and your profession, on behalf of all your students, to your community and your elected officials. If not for yourself and for your colleagues, do it future principals, or we might not have any. Continue to be resilient and know every day you show up to work, you make a positive difference in the lives of your students and families. ■