



Been There, Done That

A principal returns better prepared after working at the district level

By Jamie Hitzges

Have you ever wished you could go back in time and do something over? Have you ever thought, “If I knew then what I know now”? Well, I have, too—and I have returned to the elementary principalship.

My journey has taken me from a childhood fraught with abuse to working as a teacher, to corporate America, and back to teaching and administration as assistant principal and principal. After five years in the central office as assistant superintendent, I came back to the principalship because I thought I could be a better

version of myself and improve upon that first try.

Rediscovering a Passion

In spite of what I would consider a successful tenure as an assistant superintendent, I eschewed the prestige and pay to return to the schoolhouse. Why? I read the book *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* by Greg McKeown and asked myself the three questions it posed: What was I good at? What was needed in the world? What did I have a passion to do? None of my answers included managing financials,

transportation, technology, food service, or facilities—all things I had done as assistant superintendent.

The “passion” question was the most difficult. I entered the teaching profession as many do: to experience the joy of working with children and the vicarious thrill of seeing them grow and expand their minds. As an assistant superintendent, I distanced myself—literally and figuratively—from the daily reward of working with children.

Two things struck me: First, I missed working with kids; second, my work in the central office

often involved conversations with principals relating to instruction, operations, personnel, and/or general philosophy. I was gaining perspective on what worked and what I could have done better when I was a principal. I had positive examples to lean on from the school leaders with whom I worked. Furthermore, I had the experience of running a medium-sized district's operations, and I could see the bigger landscape. The confluence of perspective and reflection led me to the decision to go back to the principalship.

I am happily trying my darndest to take what I learned from my first tenure and do better.

Authentic and Open

Now that I have returned, I focus on authenticity. As a first-time principal, I was not my full, authentic self. Rather than owning my marginalized experiences and explaining the rationale for why I did what I did, I made vague references. After all, how could I reveal that I was once a sexually abused, impoverished student? This is not a conversation I thought I should have. When I returned to the principalship, I vowed that things would be different. As Susan Scott suggests in her book, *Fierce Conversations*, I came out from behind myself to be who I am.

For me, as the new principal of a high-poverty, high-diversity elementary school, the last year has been exhausting and exhilarating. During my first meeting with faculty and staff, I shared experiences of tragedy and triumph, along with the reasons I was returning to the schoolhouse. The reaction was overwhelmingly positive for a couple of reasons. First, I was able to “own” my authentic self. When teachers talk to me, they might not always agree with my stance, but

they know from where my reasoning is derived. Next, although I am a white male, those revelations have made it easier to maintain credibility in situations where I might not otherwise have been heard.

One of the hardest things to do as a principal is to foster a culture in which the unspoken is mentioned. As a first-time principal, I didn't necessarily know how to approach relationships between adults in a building. In fact, I stayed away from potentially sticky situations. There were certain things I was not sure I wanted to—or should—handle.

The relationships in a building can determine day-to-day climate. If the adults in my building can't get along, how will the students? Though many conversations might be uncomfortable, a collaborative, joyful work environment in a school is critical to our children—and, selfishly, to the principal's happiness.

While I can't ensure that my second time around will be without bumps, I can say I am happily trying my darndest to take what I learned from my first tenure and do better this time. I have come a long way in building better communication.

My career path is not typical, so this pursuit won't be possible for everyone; not many principals get to work in a district's central office and then return to a school. Perhaps we ought to provide opportunities for principals to gain perspective by shadowing mentors at the central-office level. Beyond that, I would implore all principals—experienced or novice—to show up authentically and transparently, and place conversations at the root of their leadership. Take my advice: I've been there, done that, and I'm back again! 📧

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