

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly Life of Educational Administration

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Like almost anything in life, there are the *good*, the *bad*, and the *ugly* times. In educational administration, the *good*, the *bad*, and the *ugly* will look differently to each person, and those differences will make an educational administrator strong and knowledgeable. Through my experiences at the campus level, my *good*, *bad*, and *ugly* times gave insight into campus administration. Sharing some of these experiences are what I do when teaching principalship courses to aspiring campus leaders and what I'd like to share here.

What I Have Learned

When I began my career in education as a teacher, I thought that teaching was all I ever wanted to do. I wanted to teach, and I had the opportunity to do so as both a special education and general education teacher at the elementary and middle school levels. The teaching positions I held were at different schools in different states, and as a military wife, I had the chance to work in several public and Department of Defense schools. Working at different campuses and different school districts helped me understand how each school has its own personality. The personalities were evident in leadership styles, teacher personalities, campus organizations, and expectations for student success.

The Good

The good can be something that stays truly good throughout an experience for an administrator, or the experience can start off as not so good, but end up very good. During my third year of teaching, my assistant principal encouraged me to get my master's degree in educational administration, which I did, but I didn't pursue an administrative position until I thought I was a credible and masterful teacher. After seven years of teaching, I pursued an administrative position and was hired to work with 33 teachers and seven teacher aides at a high school with over 200 teachers. I had much to learn, since I had never taught at the high school level. I was nervous, excited, scared, and determined. Nevertheless, my principal told me that the other assistant principals had met with him, and they believed that I needed to take over the special education responsibilities. Hence, I became the special education coordinator and the assistant principal for students with special needs. My duties and responsibilities were overwhelming since I was only on campus for 4 days a week working an 80% contract. I was still a full-time doctoral student who attended classes all day on Mondays, a full-time parent, and I was essentially working in a full-time position while getting part-time pay! When I realized that some on the administrative team, including other females, did not support my doctoral studies I then understood that the extra duties that came my way were an effort to discourage me from reaching that goal.

Nevertheless, I took my new position seriously, and although I thought I would collapse from exhaustion, I embraced the challenge. In doing so, I learned more than I believed possible about

student discipline, the hearing process, the grievance process, curriculum, and all things that matter to high school students and faculty.

Throughout this administrative experience I was fortunate to have the support of my principal and those staff members who were assigned to me, which helped me focus on exceeding expectations as I performed my job. I thank God for my time in this position, because it helped me in my future work, prepared me to take on other administrative positions successfully, and gave me the knowledge and experience that I still share with my graduate students today. Who would have ever thought this would be a *good* time? It proved, however, to be one of my best administrative experiences. This *good* helped me learn to

- see a new administrative position as an opportunity to learn;
- love the job you are in now and learn all that you can!;
- have a support system in place to help you remember what is important; and
- suck it up and move on! Or, take everything in stride, especially things you can't change, and show that you can accomplish any task that is given to you.

Ultimately, have fun! Find all of the positives or good in a new position first, because those positives will help you when you have to work through the negatives, or the bad times in your career.

The Bad

As a young administrator, *the bad* occurred when my inflated self-perceived and self-important bubble was burst after earning an administrative position. I applied for the special education director position within my district. Because the superintendent was a family friend and because of my cockiness and my grand delusions of my importance, I expected that I would be given the directorship. Things seemed to be going in my favor when I reached the highest interview level; however, the job went to a seasoned principal who was being reassigned. Because I had so much support from the special education staff throughout the district, I thought I had enough clout to make an appointment with the superintendent and give him "what for!" Amazingly, the superintendent met with me. To this day I will respect him for giving me the time and platform to speak to him.

During the meeting, I calmly and bluntly explained to him why I thought I deserved the special education directorship and how I thought the wrong person was chosen. I also showed my 5 and 10-year plans for the program! At that point, the superintendent plainly told me that I may have the credentials and experience to take the position, but because of my youth, I would not be taken seriously. He commended my 5- and 10-year plans but stated clearly that the selection of the special education director had been made and *that was that*. Undaunted, I foolishly continued to argue my case. However, I conceded and left when I realized that I would hurt my chances of any future promotions. In fact, I did hurt my chances for immediate promotions, and I was blacklisted for about two years. I was finally promoted, but the two years of not being able to advance really humbled me and helped me mature into an administrator who could accurately assess my self-importance. What I learned from my black-listed, over-inflated ego experience was

- there will always be others who could be perceived as a better fit for a position;
- being a strong self-advocate is good, but expecting that self-importance will be recognized as a good quality can be bad and misguided; and
- being passed over for a promotion isn't always bad.

Most importantly, I learned to have humility and not to take myself too seriously. This *bad* event was nothing compared to the ugly events that came later in my career.

The Ugly

There may be many ugly moments that new administrators will work through, but the ugliest is when the death of a student or beloved teacher occurs. Unfortunately, I have been at campuses during both occasions. I learned that the ugly can happen in an unexpected time, manner, and place.

At one high school where I loved working, we experienced a student's death each year for a five-year span. We had two suicides, a murder-suicide, a drunk student who hit his head while falling from a moving car, an inexperienced driver who crashed late one night, and a terminally ill student who died from a brain tumor. A happy environment of a new campus was darkened each year with these tragedies. Worried educators became afraid to get close to the students. Many students jokingly called the high school "cursed" and "haunted"; It was clear that the students were trying to hide their fears by making light of the ugly events that plagued their high school.

Another ugly moment in any administrator's life is when a teacher dies. After living through student deaths, we faced the sorrow of losing two very adored teachers. Both deaths were due to car accidents, one that involved a drunk driver and another that involved an unfocused truck driver. Their colleagues, the students, the parents, and the community loved both teachers, because they were excellent master teachers who were respected and trusted. I also adored both of these teachers. They had natural teaching abilities. They knew how to reach each and every student in their classes, and they both genuinely cared about teaching and helping students succeed. Losing them was a great loss from every angle.

These ugly times can't be avoided, unfortunately, and the only thing that an administrator can do is lead everyone through the grief. I tried my best to be strong and to help everyone else live through their grief by remembering the beloved students and teachers. I also made sure to allow myself to grieve. At night I was able to cry and let go of my sadness to accept their deaths. With time, we were all able to get through the ugly times. From this *ugly* experience I learned

- death is natural, yet it will disrupt an educational environment for an undetermined period;
- everyone grieves differently and at different times; and
- to cherish those you work with and appreciate the present.

The ugly times were hard to live through, but they brought our campus family closer together and that made the *ugly* times *good*.

Now What?

Now, as I teach graduate courses that focus on educational administration, I excitedly think about the “good ‘ole days” when I was on a campus helping make positive changes and finding positive changes in myself. I also recall the mistakes that I made and tell my students proudly about them, asking them to learn from me. Of course, the full picture of the past is easier to view in the present and lamentations of what could have been do creep into my mind. Nevertheless, the *good*, the *bad*, and the *ugly* times helped create the educator I am today, and for that I am forever thankful.

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