

Ep #115: Your First Year as a Principal with Jena Damiani



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Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to Episode 115.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal Podcast*. A not-so-typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host, certified life coach Angela Kelly Robeck.

Angela: Hello, my empowered leaders. I am so excited for this podcast today because, for the first time ever, I am interviewing one of my clients. She's a first-year principal. Her name is Jenna. And she has been so amazing to work with this year and she's really had some incredible transformations over the course of our time together.

And I wanted to highlight her work and honor all the work that she's done as a first-year principal, and ask her the questions about coaching and about her school year, and for you listeners to get the perspective of what it's like to be on the other end, to be a client of mine and to have the support on a weekly basis that you need when you're going through school leadership issues on a weekly basis. So, Jena, Welcome to the podcast.

Jena: Thank you so much. Thanks for having me.

Angela: Thank you for being courageous enough to be on the podcast. This is so exciting.

Jena: Well, thank you.

Angela: So, I am just going to jump right in and ask you, why don't you just share a little bit of your story. What got you into school leadership and just tell your story to the people.

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Jena: Okay, well hi, everybody. I feel like I always have to start off my saying I'm married and I have three wonderful children. And for the past 14 years, I was a teacher and I loved every minute of it. But as my time went on in teaching, the more that I learned and got to see and experience, I just had more of a pull to be able to reach more and do more. And that ultimately is what led me to school leadership. My husband is also in school leadership, so seeing him go through his journey for the past five years, it empowered me to do the same thing. So here I am. The wish has been granted.

Angela: And so, prior to becoming a school leader, was your husband a school leader before you?

Jena: He was, yes, for four or five years.

Angela: So, a significant amount of time. So, what were your thoughts, having a spouse that's a principal before you were, what were your thoughts on school leadership before you got in, knowing the day to day things that he goes through?

Jena: So, I knew that there were really tough days, but I think obviously really highly of him as a person, and I got to see the impact that he was able to have on his school. And because we are in a close proximity to where he works, I've actually had people who have said things to me personally about ways that he's impacted. So knowing that even though it's a really difficult job, it's a stressful job, that it's certainly rewarding and you can really make change.

Angela: Agreed. It's one of those jobs where even though you feel a little more removed from the kids, you can sense and feel the bigger impact that you have on all of the students in your school.

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Jena: The students that need the most, you can be that person to get them what they need.

Angela: So, you decided to become a school leader. I'm assuming you went through the credential process and got your credential. And then how did the interview process go?

Jena: It was actually a very quick process. And I mean, nerve-wracking because – I hate to use this analogy but – it feels like speed-dating. I've never met these people in my life, and I have to, somehow, in this 30-minute interview explain to you not only who I am as a person but why I'm with this job and what impact I will have. There's so much to say in such little time, but I will say, I took a lot of time in really thinking through my thoughts and preparing and ultimately just thought to myself, if I'm the right fit then I'm the right fit and if I'm not, I'm not. And that kind of helped me calm my nerves and, like I said, it worked out. Here I am.

Angela: So, this was the first interview, like, the job that you have now was your first interview?

Jena: I had had one previous interview for an assistant principal position that I had round one and that was it. And then a few months later, where I'm currently at now, that position opened and I was lucky enough to be the chosen candidate. And that was a three-round interview, the last round being the entire school board and the upper administration. So it was a lot. But you can do it.

I think thinking about, if someone had said to me, they want you to do a good job. They want you to find the person that's going to lead their school. So, they're almost rooting for you. And if you shift your mind like that – because a lot of times, people don't typically smile in interviews. So, you're

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looking at people that are staring back at you. You don't really get affirmative head nods that often. It feels a little unnatural of a conversation, but they have to be that way.

Anyway, so thinking about regardless of what kind of visual I'm getting back from them and trying to read them, if they like me or not, they want me to do well. That worked for me, thinking in that mindset helped me be calm enough to help me to answer the questions and really show who I am.

Angela: That's really important to share with listeners because a lot of listeners to this podcast are aspiring principals and they get discouraged because they've had several interviews. And, of course, if you don't get a yes the first or second or third time, your doubts start to creep up and you start to wonder if you're the right fit or what are you saying that's wrong, like something wrong with you. So it's good to know that you had to adjust your mindset to not only do I want a position as a school leader, but they need me. Like, they want us too. It's a mutual interest.

Jena: Right.

Angela: So listeners out there, this is the time of year too where people are interviewing and getting ready for next year. And if you want to be a school leader, please know that when you're preparing for your interviews that they want you to be authentic. They want you to tell them what you're thinking. It's okay to say, "I don't know, but I'm willing to learn." And that sometimes it takes several interview attempts in order to land that right position for you. But just know, the right position is out there and you will get the position you were meant to get.

Jena: Absolutely, yep, don't give up. You'll end up where you're meant to be.

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Angela: So, speaking of that, Jena, let's talk about where you landed and how your first year is going. Just tell the listeners a little bit about what your first-year experience has been like.

Jena: Okay, so the year has gone faster than any year that I have ever worked. I mean, time is flying by. But not one day is the same. And I actually love that. That's probably another reason why it goes so fast. But I learn something new every day, which I also love. And there's just so much that happened this year and so much that I've, you know, even though you take classes and you do an internship and – I mean, look at me, I was married to someone who was doing the job for four years prior to me doing the job. And even with that, there's really no way to anticipate some of the things that come your way. And that is both exciting and kind of scary at the same time, which I know we're getting to talking about later, about why a coach is so important, because there's no book, there's no class that really gives you everything that you need for this job, just because of the nature of it. It's unpredictable. It really truly is. So, it's having that person that you can talk to no matter what arises.

Angela: Yes, you can't write some of the stuff that happens in a day as the principal.

Jena: You really can't. But the bonds that you form with the people that you're with that are experiencing it with you is really pretty cool.

Angela: I always tell clients who are looking to become a principal, it's like having kids. You can read all the books. You can take parenting classes. You can prepare yourself as much as you think is possible. And then the little ones show up and you're like, "What just happened?" And you just have no idea what to really expect or how it's going to feel on a day to day

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basis, and the highs and the lows of parenting. And in some ways, you are parenting, you're parenting 500 kids and a bunch of adults.

Jena: It's so true. It's a perfect analogy.

Angela: Yes, so it is unpredictable. But that is the beauty of it. That's why it's so fun and that's why people aspire to become a school leader. So, let's talk about the unexpected, or the expected rewards of the job. Like, what do you love about the job? What do you love about the work that you do? What did you expect to love and what surprises you about what you love?

Jena: So, something that I thought that I understood how a school kind of operated, and I did to a point, but I have such a greater appreciation for the entire school system. I mean, I really didn't – from the cafeteria to the custodial staff, to the business office, to transportation, I mean, these things, when you're a teacher, you don't typically have to communicate because it doesn't really pertain to your job and, you know, that's fine.

But as a building principal, all of those things I just mentioned become really important components that a lot of times I'm communicating with quite often and definitely has made me appreciate even more how all of these people and all of these different departments really work together to make the schools as great as they are. Because I thought that I knew, but I really didn't.

Angela: Yes, well they're all running in the background. When you're a teacher, your focus is on the kids in the classroom, and that's all running kind of in the background. But when you become the school leader it's like, whoa, this is front and center.

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Jena: Absolutely, and then the other component was the school board and how they are such an important piece to the puzzle. And again, as a teacher, I didn't have to communicate with any school board members or attend school board meetings and through attending them now and communicating things to them, seeing what piece that they play as pretty much the community representatives, that's been pretty cool too, just appreciate the whole school system and how it's really a cool thing how we – I keep saying cool like a million times. I better come up with a better adjective here. But I kind of wish that everybody could, at some point, be able to see just all the moving pieces. And I think it would create a lot more understanding with the school, how much it really takes to run a school.

Angela: Yes, and you're right. The staff, they're busy doing their piece of the puzzle, and then parents are coming in and thinking that they know how to tell you to run the job. But nobody really understands the full capacity of the job until you're sitting in the principal's seat. It's big, but it is fun to see that picture.

I know, for me, it was such an eye-opener and kind of a revelation, like oh – you think back to thoughts you had about your school leader when you were a teacher, like why don't you just do this or do that. And you get up there and like, oh, there is so much more to this than I anticipated.

Jena: Yes indeed.

Angela: Yes, so let's talk about what has been a challenge for you this year.

Jena: Well, it's so different than teaching, and that's a challenge, just getting used to the new demands. And since you had mentioned that a lot of aspiring principals listen to this, I would say that, for me, from going from

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a teacher to a principal. I was used to, as a teacher, being really well-liked and never really having people upset about decisions I was making as a reading specialist. People were pretty good with me and my day kind of went on its merry little way.

And then, when you step into a leadership role, you make decisions and people have opinions about those decisions. And sometimes they like it and sometimes they don't. And it takes a while to adjust to that. It's almost instinctively for me, like, taking it personally, where it's not personal at all. It's the principal's decision. It's not Jena's decision that they're upset about. But you're just not used to that.

I think that has been really challenging too because you're still trying to build relationships with your staff. And it's just you are viewed differently. It's just the truth. You're not a teacher anymore. You don't have a third-grade team that you lunch with every day and plan with. And mind you, I have a principal at another elementary school who definitely I would consider a team member of mine. And we work great together. But it's just not in the same capacity as you're used to. And it may not, as I'm describing this, seem like that big of a change or that big of a challenge, but it definitely was challenging for me.

Angela: Exactly. That transition from being on a team to being solo basically, it's very isolating and teachers are collaborative in nature. I mean, that's how we work together. And you go from having this team and having people that you like and trust and respect into this other role, and all of a sudden, people are looking at you like you've gone to the dark side. That's what people used to tease me and I was like, whoa, I'm still me. But you're not viewed the same.

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Jena: Right, it's so funny because that's exactly how I thought to myself. It's Jena, but's that not the first thing they see when I walk into the room. I'm not Jena. I'm the building principal.

Angela: Exactly. Yeah, your title precedes your when walk into a room and you're first the principal, and then the human being behind that title. So, I think that's really, really hard. What other challenges have come up? Let's let the listeners know the truth.

Jena: Yeah, I mean, balance is definitely a challenge. I've been lucky enough that my husband and I worked out a schedule that I can say that the family and work balance has actually been going quite well. I don't have a real large commute to my school. And I often get my laptop out after my kids go to bed. But they're young, so they go to bed fairly early. So that really has not been that much of a challenge for me, but I just thought I would mention that because I'm sure that might be a question for a lot of people listening.

Angela: Most people struggle with that.

Jena: Yeah. I think if you lean on people who can help you and come up with a schedule that can help. But for me, the balance challenge was more at work because some days will be quiet but there are some days where you just have so many things thrown at you. And you might have an observation in your calendar and a meeting with a parent and maybe you're going to meet with your guidance counselor to follow up on a student concern.

And what seems to be a pretty light day can turn into just a whirlwind of a day because you will have people that will come at you. They will just see you in the hallway and they will just come to you with something and it's

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having to either be able to empower them and talk them through whatever it is that they need. Maybe they can handle it on their own, but they just need to talk through it with somebody. Or is it having to take that on and when are you going to do that? Because now you've been called that there's behavior that's happening at your school. So that can be definitely...

And then I think what comes along with that is I oftentimes feel a little bit misunderstood. Like, I don't think people really know what a principal does all day. And it's to no one's fault because again, no one knows unless they've done the job. Really and truly, you just don't know. Anyway, so sometimes it can feel like people might question, like, did you get my email? And you think to yourself, oh my gosh, if you only knew what I've been dealing with for the past hour, no I didn't get to your email, but why are you making me feel bad about it? I'm not ignoring you, I just genuinely – I rather would have been reading your email than dealing with what I just was. But anyway, that is also definitely a challenge.

But in a weird way, again, I do like that the days are never the same and it kind of keeps you on your toes. So it's not the end of the world challenge, but it's definitely something that if I don't talk with you about it or be really conscious about, my thoughts and things can bring me down, can make me feel bad or frustrated.

Angela: There will be days like that. There's no perfect solution to not ever having a bad day. Being an Empowered Principal is not about having a perfect schedule, but it's about understanding and being aware that you're navigating a lot of things and that it's going to spill over the plate sometimes, and that's all okay.

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One real quick question, because I know that this is such a hot topic for people. How do you manage your – you mentioned some days are great, some days are just constant interruption and people have no idea what you're doing. So, on the day to day, how do you manage your schedule to make sure you're being time-efficient.

Jena: So, this is something that I've had to work at. But I will block in times in my schedule, intentional times that either I need to do something, so that would be an observation, or if I need to check in with a student or follow up with a parent, that will go in my calendar. And then I also – this is more recent – I was not getting into classrooms. And it wasn't because I was chit-chatting in the office. There's always something to do...

Angela: You're not alone, Jena.

Jena: I know. But that's part of what brings me joy. And a strength of mine is the instructional end. I have a lot to offer in giving feedback and things like that, so I have it blocked in my calendar and I told my secretary, please do not put anything in during this. I give myself an hour time block, and I'm going to try to devote an hour a day to being with the kids. I mean, it would be great if I could have more than that. But hey, if the minimum is an hour, I'll take it.

And I do notice that today, for example, I got my hour. And I felt better. There was a lot of unpleasanties today that happened. But I really think that I just need that time. So, putting it in your calendar as a reoccurring event and telling your secretary, please don't schedule anything during this time. And knowing that if something comes up at 10 o'clock, which is when you're supposed to be in the classroom, you know, I could move it to one o'clock. It's not the end of the world if it's not that exact hour every day, but I'm still a work in progress, but that's my newest thing that I'm trying.

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Angela: Thank you so much for sharing that because so many people struggle with wanting to get into classrooms and they just feel inundated. They feel like they can't put it on their schedule or they can't honor it because something's coming up. And I think telling your secretary and kind of creating some sacred space around that time is how you can develop the skill of getting into those classrooms on a more regular basis.

Jena: And I mean, we're far into the school year, and trust me, I still have not found the perfect schedule and getting into classrooms every single day, but I'm hopeful that's going to get better.

Angela: It will be waves of consistency where it's working really well, and then something comes up. But the point is, the more often it happens and the more committed and protected that time is, it just becomes a habit. And so, you'll get to it the majority of the time, really which is the goal. You're not going to be able to negate any interruptions, but prioritizing it and protecting it, having your secretary protect it, that's a great strategy for actually getting to honor it.

Jena: Yeah, thank you.

Angela: I'm proud of you.

Jena: Thank you, but it was also kind of neat when I opened up to some teachers about this challenge that I was having and telling them that I am not getting into classrooms as much as I would like to and I'm really trying. And I had a teacher comment to me today that they noticed that I've really been trying and they really enjoy seeing me more, but they know that it's hard. So it's kind of cool that I showed my vulnerability a little bit with one of my teachers and it's kind of, in a weird way, bonded us a little bit there, I

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think, just to show that no one's perfect and we're all trying to figure it out and just do the best that we can.

Angela: Such an important point. Listeners out there, we've talked about vulnerability a million times on the podcast and I talk about it with all of my clients, but what Jena is saying is so true, that just exposing the human side of you and letting them know, like, hey I'm up here trying my best and I'm human and I'm trying to figure this out too, we're in this together, that just allows your teachers to see you and relate to you and understand, like, that you're not just hiding away in the office all the time, that you're actually trying to get out there just as much and support them. And they can really appreciate that. So, thank you for sharing that, Jena, that's really important for people to hear.

So, let's talk about coaching. Let's talk about our coaching and, I mean, I just embrace all of the fun we've had this year coaching together, and I would love for the listeners to hear your perspective on what coaching has done for you.

Jena: I mean, I can't even put a value on it. And I don't know where I would be if I didn't have the coaching. I don't know if maybe the family and work balance wouldn't be what it is, because I can come home and shut it off for a little bit and spend some time with my kids and my husband. But it's so nice to know that I have my coaching time with Angela every week. I don't have to filter. I just say it. she knows where I'm coming from. She lets me just get it all out. And it's such a nice release and she understands because she's done the job, which is huge.

Again, no one, unless you've done this job, you really don't understand. And she's done the job, so she understands what you're saying, how you're feeling, how to work you through it. And I mean, I'm just to unbelievably

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grateful. And I feel like, Angela, I'm sorry, you're going to be stuck with me forever, because even when I'm not a first-year principal, I don't see how unpredictable this job can be. I think I'm always probably going to need her.

Angela: That works for me. I love working with you, so it's fine.

Jena: Again, I mean, it's such an important role to be a building principal, but it's also a role where you are in the spotlight. And even things that aren't really in your control, people look to you. So, if there's a parking light that's out in your building and there's a basketball game and a parent's upset because the parking lot was dark, they're probably going to call you because you're the building principal, and you have nothing to do with the parking lights.

You're the face of the school. We need people in this role. So, I don't want to scare anybody or make anyone think, like, "Aargh, the face of the school." But I'm willing to bet, if you're listening to this, you are that person who has the grit and the stamina to do this job. But you're the face of the school and that's a lot. That's a lot to take in. That's a lot to process. And having a coach to be able to talk with and explain how you're feeling and have her do her magic and it kind of get into your brain and make sense out of things, which is just crazy, it's just amazing. I'll be quiet now because I could keep talking and talking and talking and Angela, we've never met in the flesh. We've only ever spoken to each other. But I honestly can just tell she's a wonderful person. Obviously, she's a wonderful coach and you would be very lucky to be able to work with her.

Angela: Well, thank you for that. Wow, I mean, it really is a joy to help, especially Jena just has such an energy and a positivity about her. And one of the things she said to me – I think it was just in our last session – she said, "You know, I was a really connected teacher. I had a lot of friends.

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Parents liked me. My boss liked me. Not a lot of conflict. And then you get into this job and you're thinking, I have what it takes to do this..." and she does.

And I guess what I walked away with is even the people who are most prepared for this position find it to be a challenge. It's a unique kind of job and it's, like you said, it's something people can't understand unless they've been in it. And when you're in it, you need somebody who understands you because you could tell this story to – you could go to therapy and tell this story, but if they haven't led a school, it's a different kind of response that you're going to get.

Yeah, I really appreciate you saying that. And I think that this type of coaching, there's a lot of buzz around coaching out there. And I know, when I went to the conference last week in San Diego, they're talking about principal coaching. But what I'm noticing is it's really more of a mentorship. And I see there's a difference.

Because what you and I will talk about and what my clients and I talk about is really like the emotional and mental wear and tear as a leader, versus, like – and I might be teaching you a skillset, or you might ask specifically about a how to do something, but the majority of our conversations tend to be around what you're thinking and feeling about things and how that's showing up in the way that you're approaching a particular situation.

Jena: Yeah, that's absolutely true because I do have a great team that I work with. The administrative team at my district is wonderful. And so, they definitely are the mentors of showing me how to do things that maybe I don't know how to do. And they also certainly help me through certain situations. But, like what you just said, it's that mental emotional piece that again, sometimes, my team members can help me through it, but you have

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a way and a system that you teach your clients that you can use. It's just so helpful.

And honestly, as much as you've helped me through this year as a principal, I've caught myself using the strategies that you've taught me to process through problems just that happen in my personal life as well. So it's really transferable.

Angela: Oh, that's good to hear because we are one human being. And this is what I say. You don't drop off your brain and your emotions when you walk into the school. There's one brain and there's one heart and there's one set of emotions that are coming and going between school and home. And understanding how they interact and how they're connected, it can, like you said, transfer between home and school.

And really, at the end of this, when you think about it, the goal is to empower yourself as a person so that you can go into any job setting and feel empowered, in any school or district-level setting and use these tools. And not just at work, but at home. Because the way we do anything's the way we do everything. So, the way that home life is going is going to impact work and vice versa.

Alright, Jena, finally, what would you say to listeners who are curious but a little bit hesitant about coaching? Because I know a lot of people out there are like, "This sounds amazing, but I don't really understand it." What would you say to them?

Jena: I mean, I would say go for it, for sure. I mean, what do you have to lose, honestly? And if you try it and you're like, "Not for me," then so be it. That's fine. At least now you know. It certainly won't hurt any to give it a try and see if it benefits you or not. And I guess I would also say, you know,

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we as a society value – and there's a lot of talk about our health physically. So people go to the gym and make sure they get outside in the sun and maybe take vitamins and that's all certainly really important.

But I would argue that equally important is our mental health. And just as we invest in our physical health with gym memberships and vitamins and supplements and what have you, I do think that there's something to be said for investing in our mental wellbeing as well. And especially in the role as a principal, at least for me, I definitely needed it. And I'm just so grateful that I found Angela and she was kind enough to take me under her wing and help me.

Angela: Yes, this is what I do. This is what I love to do and my goal is to expand this service to anyone who wants support and help. And like you said earlier, our mental and emotional needs, they don't go away. Just because we're a second-year principal, there are still challenges that come up and there are still things that happen at school that we really struggle with.

We struggle to understand why and we have really intense emotional reactions to them. And when we're growing and learning and evolving ourselves as a leader, we need support, like getting through that. And I think that this kind of service, it wasn't available for me when I was out there. And I feel like I've created it from the ground up.

I don't know that there's other certified life coaches out there offering support to school leaders. But what I will say is that I think in five to 10 years it's going to be a service that I hope will become a very mainstream part of what school districts offer to their leaders. Because you do play such an important role in the success of students and without mentally and

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emotionally fit school leaders and educators and the teachers as well, we're not going to be able to evolve the way we teach our kids.

Jena: Yeah, I completely agree.

Angela: Wow, well, I really appreciate your courage again for coming on the podcast. This is Jena's first podcast. And she has done an amazing job and I'm so...

Jena: Thank you.

Angela: Yes, we want to make her famous so...

Jena: Oh my gosh. Maybe we have a future radio station that we're going to – maybe that's what the next step is, Angela. I don't know.

Angela: That sounds like fun. A lot of potential to be had. Gosh, well thank you so much, Jena, for being on today. I really appreciate it. And I look forward to working with you for years to come.

Jena: Thank you for having me and thank you for everything, I really appreciate it.

Angela: You're so welcome. My pleasure. There you have it, listeners. This is Jena, her first year as a school leader. We have coached together for the majority of her year and it has been amazing for me, as I hope it has been for her. And if you have any questions and want to learn more about coaching, feel free to reach out at angelakellycoaching.com. have an empowered week. Take care, bye-bye.

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