

Ep #117: Leading Your School Through a Crisis with Gina Yonts



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Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to Episode 117.

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: Happy Tuesday and welcome to *The Empowered Principal Podcast*. So happy to have you here this week. And I have a very special treat for you today. I have a new friend and colleague here with us today. Her name is Gina Yonts. She is an associate director with AWSP, which is the Association of Washington School Principals. And I'm going to let Gina tell you a little bit more about herself, but I am thrilled to have her on the show today and it is going to be such a special podcast. So, Gina, welcome to the podcast.

Gina: Good morning. Welcome to all these wonderful listeners out there.

Angela: Thank you so much for taking the time and for figuring out all of the technology.

Gina: We can do tough things. We can figure these things out.

Angela: That's right. So, it took us a little time to get started, but here we are. We have made this work. So, Gina, can you please tell our listeners a little bit about who you are, your background in education, and what you're doing currently to help school leaders?

Gina: You bet. So, my husband and I got teaching jobs in the Walla Walla Valley, which is Southeastern Washington, in the early 90s. So, we've

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actually been in our community teaching and coaching for almost 30 years. I taught fourth and fifth grade, intermediate grades, at a local elementary school, and then went into school administration. I was an assistant principal for six years and then a lead principal of the middle level for five years, and then finished up a leadership tenure in our district at the elementary level. So, I've been at all three levels there between assistant principal work, lead principal work, and then classroom teaching.

So, interesting things about Walla Walla is we do have the state penitentiary in our community, and so a large portion of my leadership work has been supporting families who may have lifetime or short-term incarcerated family members, and then just loving upon the community and being a part of what's called the Walla Walla Children's Resilience Initiative, which is a community action-based group that really takes the information around ACEs and trauma and really pushes a resiliency initiative.

So, flashforward after about 28 years in the Walla Walla public schools, I decided to throw my name in the ring to be a statewide association principal support person in the field. So, currently I am a year and a half into a principal support role where I go into small schools, larger schools, work with principals around principal mentoring and principal induction, as well as just growing great principal leadership for the state of Washington for my regions.

Angela: Yes, amazing work. And you can tell the listeners how we connected. I love our story and I love how quickly our friendship has blossomed because we're such kindred spirits and we believe in the same things and we're working on the same things. So, you can tell the listeners a little bit about how we met up and how we've exploded into not just good colleagues but good friends.

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Gina: Exactly, yes, a Batman and Robin experience here in Gotham City. So, part of my job was to work with some other female leaders on our leadership team to pull together, this last November, we had a women educators' leading and learning workshop, just for female leaders in the state of Washington, recognizing the importance of female leadership and how to grow a network of support and learning for female leaders who are oftentimes CEO of the household and then coming to work and trying to be the CEO at the building level as well.

So, we had an amazing – about 100 participants attend our first WELL and Angela was one of your speakers. So, she came and spoke with us about the principles of the Empowered Principal as well as the STEAR Cycle and how we can really support ourselves in neutralizing some of those negative thoughts that stand in the way of our ability to really access a full happy leadership life.

And so, we got to know each other back in November. And then super blessed she came up a couple of weeks ago in March and just participated in some of our professional development series with first-year principals as well as continuing ed principals, and had a great time teaching alongside my colleague Jack and I.

Angela: Yeah, it was so much fun. I'm really glad that I came. And at the time I had no idea what Coronavirus was. I jumped on a plane. I went straight to the epicenter in Seattle and we had an amazing time and I'm really glad that I did it.

Gina: And you survived.

Angela: I'm right here. There is no Coronavirus in my body that I know of, so all is well. So speaking of, I have to be lighthearted to some degree

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about the Coronavirus, but it really is something that is weighing on school leaders and the current state of education right now. It's completely changed the face of how we think about education and how we're going to move forward. It's going to revolutionize the field in some way shape or form and we don't know that yet. There's a lot of uncertainty.

And I would love – Gina and I were just talking about this the other day, the impact this is having on our school leaders, not just the how, how are we going to fix all of this, but the emotional and mental wear and tear that it's having on school leaders with all of this uncertainty, all of the unknown, all of the potential worry about the what-ifs, what is going to happen, how to deal with graduations, are we going to take kids up, promote them to the next level? There's a lot of thought going into this.

So, Gina, let's talk about some of the things we brought up in terms of the current state of school leadership, how Coronavirus has changed the way principals are thinking about the way that they have to live and lead.

Gina: Well, you know, most certainly what we are starting to realize is how truly connected our jobs are. And people look at school principals as the rock in the world of uncertainty. And what we're starting to realize right now is that school superintendents and school principals and leadership within the teaching ranks, as well as just amazing community resource people who are willing to step up and our first responders, the helpers – it's like Fred Rogers always says, in the midst of a crisis, look around, where are the helpers?

So, oftentimes, these opportunities can be really, really challenging for folks, but I think it's so important to realize it's the people that make the difference. It's the people. It's their calm that they bring to the situation, the calm that they bring, the calm that they instill in others, realizing that

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everyone's in a society right now of immediacy. And really, some of these systems, it's going to take a little bit of time to put them in place.

And so, it's just another great reminder that patience is such a huge virtue in times like this. We want there to never be an inconvenience to our daily lives. We want bread on the shelves of the grocery store. We want toilet paper, we want all those Clorox wipes, you know. But at the end of the day, guess what – are we preserving the relationships that we have with one another, extending each other grace, giving each other patience?

And one thing that I think has been so striking through all of this is how many times, as school leaders, do people say, what do you need more of? And people resoundingly say time. We need more time. Well guess what, we've just been gifted 24 hours in a day together in the home with the people that we are supporting and loving on and really it's just incredibly important. What are we going to do with this time, and what people are learning every minute of every day? So, are we taking advantage of those timeless and timely opportunities to learn? It's not always about book learning.

Angela: Exactly, and I think that this has been a coaching topic of conversation in my life coaching networks, is people are home, they're being quarantined, they are left with their thoughts. We always say we want more time and now we have it, but what we're noticing is that this is the moment for people to embrace their thoughts and their emotions, and not just what they're thinking about work, but how they're processing what this means for themselves personally, for their families, for their loved ones, for their elderly connections.

I mean, it is a scary time and no human loves the uncertainty that we are all living in right now, so this is the moment where you can take the

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opportunity to really hunker down in your brain and in your mind and in your heart, and what is it that I'm thinking and feeling and what is it that I want for myself, my family, my profession, my students, my staff, and why am I feeling the way I'm feeling?

There is no better moment than this time right now to explore tools and strategies for managing our emotions because you can see what's happening with the emotions. People are in full panic, you know. I called Target Pharmacy today and I needed a prescription updated. But I said, "Should I come in?" He's like, I'll give you a tip, and here's the secret tip of the day, "Go very early to Target. It's not that bad. But the longer you wait, the worse it gets." So, I'm holding out until tomorrow morning. I'm going to be the first person knocking on their door at nine o'clock.

Gina: Well, you know what, it's called coping.

Angela: That's right. And the next topic I wanted to bring up – and I've been talking about this a lot on Facebook lives daily, I've been emailing my groups daily just to let them know there's support. I'm giving them tips and strategies and just food for thought. And actually, Gina and I had planned to talk about this when we first decided to do this podcast together, but it's so relevant now. People forget that school leaders are humans and that we're raw individuals and we have thoughts and emotions of our own. And it's not just about serving all of the time. It's about us processing how we personally feel and not just holding space for everybody else. So, say more on your thoughts about that, Gina, about the humanness that comes with being a school leader and how we have to remind ourselves to keep grounded in that.

Gina: I think that we do a lot of work around just behavior. In the state of Washington, our discipline laws have changed dramatically over the course

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of the last year and a half. And so people are trying to wrap their heads around sweeping institutional change around school exclusion and restrictions to the learning environment and time away from instruction, those pieces.

And so, one of the things that I really think about a lot, especially in the days of Covid19, the short days here, is the importance of patience and the importance of being gentle; gentle with the families who are stressed out not knowing how to manage the school at home, maybe people having a lack of resources towards food or for the internet, when they're thinking about online components.

And then, just as leaders, being gentle with ourselves, remembering to breathe during the day multiple times. I actually found this really cool resource that I would love people to use. And it's on a Google platform. And it's a little extender. If you type in the Google search bar, "The bell of mindfulness," you can set a timer and every 15 minutes it will give this very gentle little chime and it prompts you to take three deep breaths.

Because what we realize is under stressful conditions, whether that be leadership or at home, trying to manage email and multiple Zoom platforms and technology that isn't a part of our daily workflow is we need to remember to breathe and being gentle with ourselves and giving ourselves plenty of time to figure out the workarounds with our work.

And initially, we're not going to be as efficient with our systems working from home, not having maybe a printer or needing to share technology resources at home with possibly a high school senior trying to get some coursework completed. So, we just have to forgive ourselves for having maybe a lack of patience. But remember to breathe and remember to give empathy to others and realize that we're not going to be as efficient here in

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these first days that we will be say in another week or two if we continue to be in a closure space.

So, that's, I think, probably the biggest thing, to just be gentle with yourself and those around us. Extend that kindness. And not everybody's born to be a teacher, but we all have a level of expertise. So, lean into your level of expertise and make those teachable moments.

Some moms might be great in the kitchen. Thank goodness my husband is a wonderful cook because that's not really my passion. I'm really great at cleaning the dishes and cleaning up the kitchen. But yeah, I like to leave the cooking to him. But you know what, these are great opportunities to have a helper and teach these kinds of life skills that, maybe if we're going too quick, it's easier to do ourselves than to teach and to have a partner in this learning. And I just think we need to really pullback and concentrate on how we do things together as a team, kind of team up at home.

Angela: Exactly, that is so important. And one of the things that I like to talk with my community about is how you create patience. Patience is not my virtue. I struggle with patience. As a principal, you want things done right here right now and you want to tackle as many issues as you can.

And I remember going in the day, like I'm doing this, and you would just plow through. And now that the world has slowed down and we don't get that hit of dopamine for being on our feet and running and going and having connections in the flesh, we're having to slow down and we're having to create patience with ourselves when we're not feeling patient.

But we have to remember, that emotion, it comes from our thoughts, and what you said about the deep breathing, we can connect back with our body. I love that idea. I think I'm going to download that for myself. Every

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15 minutes, just as we're talking, I felt myself – because I was kind of ramped up about all the technology problems we were having, so it's like, I'm going to lean into this and this is going to be a really fun podcast to record, regardless of the technology stress we had 10 minutes ago.

Gina: Exactly, and I think it's just so powerful, in the midst of what we're doing as leaders, whether you're the principal of your homeschool right now, or the principal of a building and you've got lots of people depending on you for answers, really it's just about buckling down and realizing that calm heads are going to prevail. And if we don't make that a priority, we are going to get swept up in a tide that's going to create way more drama than is really necessary.

We need to anticipate the milk to spill a bit. There's going to be technology challenges. There's going to be questions that we don't have answers to. There's graduation and all those things that are kind of out there looming that we know happen during the spring. And at this point in time, we need to breathe through it and give ourselves permission to not have answers. And we are sometimes the answer people.

Everyone looks at the principal and says, "They have an answer." Well, might not have an answer. We're going to do this together and it's going to take a little bit of time, but we can do this. And really focus on how strong we are and how resilient we are when we come together. And there's not a wolf at the door. And I think it's just important to continue to remind one another that taking care of ourselves and taking care of the people around us are incredibly important.

Angela: Yes. One thing I find so fascinating is that what was our problems two weeks ago, or even a week ago, when you think about the problems we were thinking were problems, like getting testing ready and set up and

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end of school year and probably teacher observations and all of those difficult conversations that come along with teacher observations, like those were our problems and how quickly our brain is like, “Oh wait, now this problem is the really big problem.” And that doesn’t feel so bad anymore.

Gina: Well, exactly, you know. And I was just at a school district on Friday and here I think they had maybe 375 staff members and we were talking about the importance of resilience. And one of the core foundations of resilience work is around Maslow’s hierarchy. Basic needs. There’s no learning if the basic needs are not taken care of.

And we are at a space right now where many people are kind of in their lower brain states trying to figure out, do we have enough food to carry us through? How do I make sure that my children have enough food if they’ve been recipients of breakfast and lunch at school? And I was thinking about having a big old pantry of food that would be easy for children to fix for themselves.

And we just have to really recognize the brain states that are at play, not only with children but with adults as well. And we know that when we are in lower brain states, that’s our reptilian brain, that’s the amygdala, that’s fight, flight, freeze. And in order to get back to a problem-solving place, it’s through the power of connection. And people don’t typically understand that you go from the brain’s stem to the middle brain, where we have to be really intentional about connecting.

And that means looking each other in the eye. That means spending cuddle time on the couch reading a book or everyone in their own book reading on the couch. That’s learning. That’s making sure that everyone is having their emotional needs met.

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And then, when they get back to the prefrontal cortex, which is a process, that's when we can get to problem-solving. So, just a simple task of determining what your daily work schedule is going to be should really be about making sure that everyone is feeling safe, that we are connecting and that we're greeting each other in the home environment or in the work environment, depending on where we're at. Making sure that we're checking in with our people, knowing and letting them communicate to us and us to communicate to them how important they are to whatever task it is we're trying to accomplish.

And then what do we want? We want to give some control back to the people we're working with to be able to establish, so, what is it we're going to accomplish today? I mean, some places may have crummy weather. We're beautiful. We've got blue skies here in Walla Walla today and I'm feeling really hopeful and anticipating a little bit of yard time this afternoon to throw the ball for my dog and to take him for a few perimeter checks around the neighborhood.

But those are all pieces about planning that we do have control over. And we're teaching as we establish connections with each other, no matter what team we're working with, whether it's the family team or just the work team, and then offering a bit of control over what we're going to accomplish during the day, I think, is incredibly important.

Angela: I agree. I think this is a practice in leaning into the messiness that comes with something new and something uncomfortable and something not understood. And it will be slower. I tell people it's the kindergarten complex. It's like, when you're brand new to school, you don't know what you're doing or how to do it, so you try all the things. And a lot of times you fail or you get redirected. But you don't need to lose the excitement and the energy and the anticipation of being new to something.

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So, we can lean into this with that disappointment or frustration, or we can lean into this like, this is actually, when you step back a little bit, this is pretty fascinating, to be honest. Like, to kind of watch it all go down and to watch how people are thinking and feeling and how they're reacting and how we're trying to ground ourselves in the craziness of it all.

Gina: That just totally reminds me of the importance of gratitude, and what a wonderful opportunity for people to keep gratitude lists, during a really challenging time. Man, there's helpers out there everywhere, and if you ever just need a little pick-me-up, get on Twitter and watch those funny little Tik-Toks where you've got families in quarantine and they're all doing swing dancing and line dancing and fun stuff.

I mean, come on, we can attack any task with drudgery or with playfulness. Personally, I choose playfulness. I'm kind of a happy otter personality; play, pay, play.

Angela: Yes, why not play? I love to pick play. It's so much more fun. One of the things you and I were talking about the other day on the phone was trying to do it all, this concept of school leaders are such in a mindset of always trying to do it all. But that isn't necessarily the best solution.

We've got schools out there going wild with trying to figure out food service and trying to figure out special education and social services or childcare needs and really trying to fulfil an entire community's needs through basically one person. That's the school leader who's trying to process this all and divvy out this support. So, what are your thoughts, tips, and strategies that you've been helping your school leaders in Washington with?

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Gina: So, I think one of the things, as we really think about this, it is just absolutely re-solidifying the importance of school leadership. And oftentimes, and I don't want to say just in Washington state, but all over the nation, public education is a system of growing and exposing people to the profession and what happens in schools.

And oftentimes, because we've participated and because we're public school graduates, we have strong opinions about whether teaching is something that we appreciate as a skillset or leadership, those kinds of things. And so, one of the pieces that I've really thought about is the importance of making sure that we're really acknowledging the role of public education in our society.

So, we talk about first responders and we talk about fire, police, hospital, nurses. We talk about these people that when something goes sideways, we really depend on these organizations to step up and to help in the minute of a crisis. And I really am just going to continue to implore our community and our nation to really value again and to speak up and acknowledge the place that schools are playing within our society.

We are first responders at the base level, where really we are not just about reading, writing, and arithmetic. We are about safety. We are about getting behind behavior and the communication around behavior. You're seeing amazing empathy skills and patience and humility from our leadership statewide as well as our classified employees, our janitors who are working and cleaning classrooms and ensuring the spread of the virus at that simple classroom level is taken care of, but then paying attention to the folks that are selflessly being asked to provide childcare options for our first responders so that people can be going to the hospital and meeting the needs of our public.

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These are scary and kind of tragic places. But we need to also really acknowledge the body of people in our public school system that are absolutely stepping up and filling a gap in service that I don't know that anyone would have been able to predict. Talk about heroes. I am just so incredibly blessed to live in a community, but in a state as well as many, many states across our nation that are having amazing people step up and volunteer and provide a level of care for our children in our communities that I think is just beyond the call of duty.

Angela: Absolutely. And I just appreciate your acknowledgment of the work they're doing because people are doing this without second thought. And they are trying to solve so many problems at once. And what I say to you, my empowered leader out there who is listening, choose the part of contribution that works for you.

I highly encourage you to do what you feel is necessary and right by your community. And I also ask that you be mindful of taking care of yourself and your own family during this time. It's a time where you need to stay grounded and you need to stay healthy and you need to be rested and prepared. And through the work of many makes lighter work. And I just want to acknowledge all of the work you're doing out there and I want to make sure that you are also keeping yourself and your health and wellbeing in mind and in check because it's easy to keep going and burning ourselves out to the point of exhaustion, and I don't want you to get to place where you aren't able to contribute in the way that you would like.

Gina: Yeah, I think that's incredibly sage advice, Angela. I can't begin to just re-solidify how important it is that compassion burnout is alive and well and we can't keep the pace up. So, as we're getting used to a little less efficiency maybe in our daily work, are you drinking your water? Are you taking time to take a little rest a couple times during the day, even if it's just 15 minutes of closing your eyes?

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Are you doing mindfulness at any point in time? There's such great practices that if you Google online, there's just a million practices around emotional first aid that people can be using, not only in their daily routines, but sharing that with their parent communities, sharing that with children.

And one of the pieces that I've really been exploring, the idea is out of tragedy there are gifts. And there's this amazing author by the name of Laurie Nadel and she's a PhD and she has a lot of experience from 9/11. And her five gifts, out of challenging and disastrous kind of times, the five gifts are humility, patience, empathy, forgiveness, and growth.

So, those five words, what an amazing thing that leaders could do is to just put those five words down on a piece of paper in their workspace, or even on a sticky note, and if you set a timer and every hour you just took a five or 10-minute break and said, "What am I learning about humility and the importance of humility in my life? What is something I can be grateful for around my patience in the last 24 hours? What's something that I could be grateful for around my empathy? Is my empathy developing around an area I hadn't necessarily thought about? Where's my level of forgiveness? Am I forgiving some of those people who are not really maybe practicing social distancing? Am I being judgy? Or am I willing to wish them well, take care of myself and control what I can control?"

And then really, at the end of each day, "How have I grown? What have I learned about myself? What have I learned about my community? What have I learned about my little homeschool setting?" To just really focus on gratitude. It can transform just common days into Thanksgivings, you know? I just feel it's so powerful.

Angela: Well you know what's so funny? How I wanted to end this conversation was what are we learning, what are the positives? What

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changes are coming from this that are a benefit? You just laid it out there. And so, Gina, can you send me the information on that book? I want to make sure that we put it in the show notes for today so that people can use it as a resource. That would be wonderful. And do you have any other resources that you are sharing with school principals that might be helpful to the listeners out there?

Gina: Well, I mean, anyone is welcome to stop by AWSP.org, our homepage. There's lots of Covid19 resources. Many of them maybe are specific to Washington state, but there's also a lot of amazing resources on there that wouldn't matter if you were from Washington state or not.

One thing that I've been doing just in the last five days to kind of keep myself from going a little wackadoo is Pandora. I'm on Pandora. And Pandora has some amazing suggestions for podcasts. Missing from that List is *The Empowered Principal*, so come on, everybody, tell everyone about *The Empowered Principal*. But there's some really interesting podcasts.

And I just feel like spending that time right now to connect in a positive way, checking in on your people but also then just taking care of yourself. But the AWSP homepage has a lot of really awesome resources if people want to go there and check that out.

Angela: Awesome. Thank you so much. Well, Gina, thank you for your time today, I appreciate connecting with you.

Gina: Of course, I'm so happy to be here.

Angela: When we got on the phone the other day, we were so excited to talk to another human being, even if it was from a social distance. So, it is

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such a pleasure to work with you. I'm so glad we've met and that we are connecting in all these different ways. And listeners out there, please check out AWSP, even if you're not from Washington state, they have an amazing supportive organization for school leaders. I know one of my next steps will be getting much more involved with the California association of school leaders and helping them see the value in coaching for school leaders and bringing emotional and mental wellbeing and resilience to you.

So, with that in mind, have an empowered week. I will talk to you guys next week. Take care. Bye-bye.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *The Empowered Principal Podcast*. If you enjoyed this episode and want to learn more, please visit AngelaKellyCoaching.com where you can sign up for weekly updates and learn more about the tools that will help you become an emotionally fit school leader.