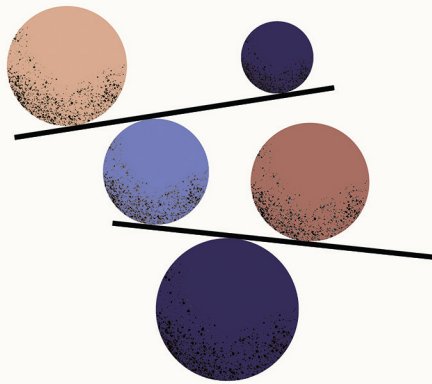


PRINCIPAL *in* BALANCE

LEADING AT WORK
and LIVING A LIFE



JESSICA M. CABEEN

Foreword by JOE SANFELIPPO, PH.D.

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Praise for *Principal in Balance*

“In *Principal In Balance*, Jessica Cabeen embraces her vulnerability to illuminate the challenges and feelings many leaders face. Filled with research, personal stories, anecdotes, gentle reminders, and practical ideas from her years of experience as a school leader, she provides you with a pathway back to living the work-home life you want to lead.”

— **Jimmy Casas**,
Leadership Coach, Educator, Author, Speaker

“Jessica provokes you to self-reflect on leading without margin, while she graciously gifts you with her own transparency of her glows and grows of self-caring while in leadership. Her chapters embark you on a journey that has allowed us to revisit our own priorities as individuals, parents, and most importantly, as life partners.”

— **Dr. Kevin and Mrs. Crystal Armstrong**

“In *Principal in Balance*, Jessica Cabeen was able to put into words the honest journey of these past few years of the principalship. Jessica’s vulnerable accounts of leadership, both at school and at home, helped me to name some of the same emotions that I have experienced. Her actionable, solution-driven strategies provide the next steps to sustainability. This will be a book that I will always keep close to reference and share readily with other leaders.”

— **Beth Houf**,
Proud Principal, Fulton Middle School,
NASSP 2022 National Principal of the Year

“*Principal in Balance* is an urgent call to action for all Pre-K-12 educators and professionals to disrupt the chaos of ‘busyness’ in leadership to reconnect, recenter, rekindle, and rejuvenate our souls and humanity. Principal Cabeen provides practical wisdom essential to reclaim our dignity, exhausting opportunities without losing ourselves, and model self-love, self-knowledge, and self-actualization.”

— **Dau Jok, Ph.D.**,
Executive Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion,
West Des Moines Community Schools, West Des Moines,
IA | CPT in the United States Army Reserve

“Jessica Cabeen not only brings solid research-based counsel, but speaks out of a transparent, authentic heart formed through significant hardship. I so appreciated her honesty and grace.”

— **David Schmus,**
Executive Director, Christian Educators

“Jessica Cabeen is an authentic leader who uses her personal story of triumph, success, failures, and setbacks to help other leaders reflect and redefine their purpose. *Principal in Balance* is full of leadership strategies that are focused on helping leaders become better versions of themselves.”

— **Sanée Bell, Ed.D.,**
District Leader, Author, and Speaker

“My 35-year journey as a K-8 teacher and principal has been an amazing experience, but also a very challenging one. I prayed one day I would find the handbook to help me thrive and survive as a leader and a father, and I found it in *Principal in Balance*. Jessica Cabeen had me thinking so much throughout the book about finding a much needed balance, but also being more forgiving and kind to myself. If you read this book and don’t feel like you can live a life worth leading and living, then you need to read it again. I am ready to lead and change education for another 10 years. Thanks Jess!”

— **Salome Thomas-EL, Ed.D**
(AKA Principal EL), Award-winning teacher, principal and author

“While each of us is a work in progress, it’s rare to come across an author who is so transparent about it, while evolving with the turn of every page. Cabeen has given us a charge, in the form of a book that will educate you, challenge you, provoke you, and speak to you. What impressed me most about *Principal in Balance* is how she embraces what Jim Collins called ‘the genius of and’ vs. ‘the tyranny of or.’ She doesn’t offer the false dichotomy of a principal being effective as a leader ‘or’ living a balanced life. She offers relatable advice, relevant research, and practical tools to move school leaders down the path of being both effective at work and whole at home. Within two chapters, I found myself setting intentions to be a better version of myself.”

— **Kenneth Williams,**
nationally recognized trainer, speaker,
coach and consultant in leadership and school culture

Principal in Balance

Leading at Work and
Living a Life

Jessica M. Cabeen

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*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in
your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Psalm 19:14*

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Foreword

I accepted my first principal job 17 years ago. It meant a move across the state of Wisconsin to a place our family had never been. My wife and two sons, ages five and two at the time, packed up the truck and started what we were convinced was going to be the best adventure ever. In October of that first year, I remember walking into my house after a particularly difficult Thursday at school. Student issues, staff issues, parent issues, and supervisor issues all seemed to hit on a crisp, cool, Wisconsin fall day. I saw the boys and my wife at the kitchen table getting ready to eat dinner as I fumbled into the house exhausted and put my bag down. I sat down at the table, famished from not eating anything while at school, and began to attack the wonderful meal my wife prepared for everyone. After what seemed to be only a few minutes I looked up from my plate and the boys were gone. My extremely supportive wife was looking my way and I asked her where the boys had gone. Her response was “Your son just asked you three questions about your day and you never even picked your head up. We need to figure this thing out, really quickly.”

I would love to tell you that from that moment I have been an incredible husband and a wonderful father who has everything figured out, but that’s simply not true. I absolutely have struggled and that comes with the job. Having said that, when we go and go and go and do and do and do, we don’t take a step back to realize the impact of go, go, go and do, do, do, both positively and negatively. Often, we look back and can’t remember how we got there. That is not balance, and we simply can’t attain our best selves when we live a life without it.

Leadership is hard, and what often happens is the people who we go home to, who love us the most and give us the most latitude, often get the least of us because of what is happening at school. We go home and think about other people’s kids and families while we try to engage with our own. Conversely, if we haven’t found balance at home, we spend the day leading a

group of hundreds or thousands while thinking about what we are missing at home. Either way, success is limited in both areas.

Jessica Cabeen has found a way to articulate the struggles of balance while finding meaningful ways to adjust practice and help you succeed both at school and at home. The quotes are inspirational and provide hope, but the practical application of what you can do as a leader, to not only move forward but feel better, is what kept the pages turning for me. There are so many resources out there that provide inspiration with no plan, and though all are engaging in the moment, few have found a way to help me move forward as a leader, both at school and at home.

Principal in Balance elicits hope, but then gives you something you can do to turn the hope into success for you and those you lead. The ground rules did just that . . . they grounded the work in the why. The gentle reminders made me laugh, but also think about things I have put on autopilot. Doing the homework put the thoughts into action in a way that wasn't overwhelming and yet I could see little wins in the action taking place every day.

You are going to love *Principal in Balance*. You are going to come back to it. You are going to reference it with those you lead. I only wish it was sitting on that kitchen table 17 years ago.

– Joe Sanfelippo, PhD
2019 ED DIVE National Superintendent
of the Year, author, and speaker

About the Author



Jessica is the Principal of Alternative Educations Programs in Austin, Minnesota. Previously, she was the principal of Ellis Middle School in Austin, Minnesota, and the principal of the “Happiest Place in Southeastern Minnesota,” the Woodson Kindergarten Center. She has been an assistant middle school principal, a special education assistant director, and special education teacher.

Jessica was named the 2021 ED DIVE National Principal of the year, 2017 Minnesota National Distinguished Principal of the Year, and was awarded the NAESP/VINCI Digital Leader of Early Learning Award in 2016. She is a NAESP Middle Level Fellow and a Future Ready Principal. Jessica is the author of *Hacking Early Learning* and co-author of *Balance Like a Pirate*, *Unconventional Leadership*, and *Lead with Grace: Leaning into the Soft Skills of Leadership*.

She is a sought-after speaker and trainer and enjoys getting to learn and lead with other educators across the nation. Jessica enjoys connecting and growing her Professional Learning Network (PLN) on the socials. She can be found on Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter @JessicaCabeen.

But by far her favorite space is the one that involves being with her husband, Rob, sons Kenny and Isaiah, and, of course, the family dog, Herman.

Acknowledgments

A work in progress. That would be a great way to summarize the years of work that have gone into the publication of this book. This idea of becoming a principal in balance has been on my mind since 2016, and only has become a reality because of the support and encouragement of a very special team.

Ashante Thomas, thanks for supporting this work from the original pitch to final production. I am grateful for our partnership and your advice, support, and encouragement.

Sunnye Collins. If our edit communication was a Snapchat streak, we would be at an epic level. Thanks for your patience in helping me craft the words to make these stories come to life.

Pete Gaughan, Mary Beth Rosswurm, Julie Kerr, and the rest of the incredible team at Jossey-Bass: thanks for taking a chance and a stance on supporting the mental health of school administrators. Your belief in this project was humbling and inspiring.

I wouldn't be practicing what I speak to in the upcoming chapters if I didn't take time to thank those on the personal side of the principalship who helped to make this book happen.

To my husband, Rob. Twenty years of marriage, an incredible family, and an amazing journey we could have never expected in October of 2002 in Mason City, Iowa. Thank you for being my best friend and biggest cheerleader through everything.

Kenny—little did you know that you were the original reason for this shift of leading at work and living a life. Thank you for always reminding me about the importance of being your parent before your principal.

Isaiah—without you I wouldn't be here. You and I have been going to school together since kindergarten and I will be in the front row celebrating all your success moving forward. I have loved every moment of being your mom at home and your principal through many of your school years.

Manny. I never expected you to enter my story, but now I can't imagine life without you. You are an incredible young man who has impacted my life and leadership more than you know.

And finally—to the staff at Ellis Middle School. Very few administrators could say their best years were the past five years (2017–2022), but I can. Thank you for your unwavering commitment to the seventh and eighth grade scholars in Austin, Minnesota. You have taught me over and over the importance of a school culture that values the person over the position, and what amazing things can occur when your school becomes part of your family.

PART |

THE GROUND RULES OF BALANCE

When you live well, you lead well.

#PrincipalinBalance

The inspiration for this book came from an unexpected Friday in May. If you are an educator, you know nothing is expected, and there are always surprises in May, especially in May of 2021. On this Friday, I spent the morning dancing with my mask on and waving to 400 hybrid students in Ellis Middle School. I went into a six-hour planning session for the upcoming master schedule while trying to balance the 80 emails I received. I ran home quickly to let our pandemic puppy out at lunch, came back, crafted a few parent messages for our school messenger, and said goodbye to students as they got on buses for home and sports.

During the day, I was criticized, yelled at, and, at the end of the day, hung up on. At 4:00 p.m., my normal routine was to get my fifth coffee of the day and settle in for a few hours of work and emails while my teenagers were out and my husband was at work.

But not this Friday. On this day, I logged off and left school. I drove 40 minutes with no podcasts, music, emails, calls, or conferences—just quiet. I stood in Minnesota May weather (sleet/snow is always possible) and cheered on my eighth-grade son and his newly acquired sport: track. Typically, when I got home to get him off the bus from his meet, I would race home and finish up what came through when I was offline. Instead, this Friday, we drove to watch a friend's soccer game for another two hours. By the time I got home, I was so fulfilled from spending time with my son I didn't feel guilty about not putting in the usual 14-hour workday. So often as servant leaders we have a hard time learning when to stop and focus on ourselves. I just can't believe it took me a random Friday in May—well into my educational career—to realize it.

So, entering the later stages of my career, I have learned a lesson I wish I would have learned much earlier on: life is more than our title. Our primary priorities should rest outside of our day job.

I strive every day to be a better *Principal in Balance*. One who is learning to lead at work *and* have a life. One who embraces time in rest instead of resisting the chance to pause. A person who learns to let the angry phone calls go and lean into the relationships of those closest to me at school, and at home.

I am becoming a principal who recognizes I can't be good for anyone if I am not good to myself first. One who has embraced a regular morning routine that always involves some form of self-care. A principal who has broken up with her cell phone and continues to find ways to regulate tech to be productive, focused, and less distracted by beeps, tweets, and notifications.

These life lessons have been learned over the past 10 years on many unexpected Fridays. I have lost time with family because I prioritized emails and evening school activities over bedtime with a toddler. I almost lost friends because I always was distracted by emails, texts, and phone calls instead of focusing on who was right in front of me. And for a period, I lost myself and who I was supposed to be when the adoption of our son was disrupted.

So, how are you?

Are you in a season where you question why you are teaching or leading? Are you struggling with prioritizing what needs to get done and what you can delegate or just let go? Have you canceled or forgotten to schedule your own medical, dental, and counseling appointments because you just don't have time? Yet will you cover a colleague's class so they can make their own appointments? Do you remember the last time you went to dinner with friends, family, or your spouse? What about the last time you sat and read a book . . . for fun?

Teachers, paraprofessionals, administrative assistants, central office staff . . . please don't let the title of this book deter you from reading! Being a *Principal in Balance* is more than a school title but an opportunity to lead your own work and life no matter what your business card says.

Becoming a *Principal in Balance* is not an endpoint, but a journey. Whether you are in a season of struggle or walking into a new position with pride and accomplishment, we can all use a few gentle reminders to reflect, recalibrate, and refocus. This book tackles some of the biggest struggles educators have in reaching points of rest. It also offers tips in setting habits to establish long-term and meaningful routines that focus on you and your family first.

As a student of resiliency, a resistor of burnout, and a recent believer of the importance of daily rest, I have learned a lot about what it can look like to be a *Principal in Balance* on a Tuesday when you are three teachers short, or when you get to work and find out you have a sick child at home. Through these experiences, we will walk through ways to establish habits for health and navigate the hiccups to the plans you put in place.

I will admit, this is kind of a bold move to write a book on balance when I am still trying to figure it out.

Yup, I haven't found the unicorn, the perfect fit, or the magic key to making my life work every day. What I do have is a passion to make a difference, and an understanding I can't operate at an unsustainable pace for long.

You see it every day on social media, news outlets, and other channels: we are tired.

You hear it from friends, coworkers, and trusted colleagues in work and life: I need to quit.

You feel it in the perceived pressures from TV, popular opinion, and Facebook posts: if you aren't on all the time, you aren't living the life you should lead.

I have days where I am pulled back into the position of busyness as a badge of honor. I still struggle with understanding that sometimes I have to slow down to see exactly the direction I am trying to go. When you are used to going at an unsustainable pace, creating a normal rhythm seems selfish and slow. Finding joy in seeing margin in your calendar seems counterintuitive to the pace of filling every day in your planner and accounting for every minute in the day. And my heart still hurts when I say no to others because I need to stop and say yes to myself. When we are called to a career that prioritizes serving, it can create, unintentionally, a sense of sacrifice over ourselves, no matter what the cost.

In this work, I have learned a lot of lessons, and through this journey, I have been acknowledged in many ways.

In 2016, I received the NAESP/VINCI Digital Leader of Early Learning Award.

... I also struggled with feeling like I wasn't enough for the students I served and my family at home.

In 2017, I was awarded the National Distinguished Principal Award for the State of Minnesota.

... and in 2018 I was slammed on social media by fake accounts and false stories about my ability to lead in schools.

In 2019, I was speaking regularly and had published my fourth book.

... and in 2020 COVID was the lowest low of my career.

In 2021, I was recognized as the K-12 DIVE Education Awards Principal of the Year.

... and in the winter of 2022, I experienced daily anxiety attacks that at times incapacitated me at work and in life.

I don't share this with you for sympathy. I offer these examples (and trust me, I have many more) to highlight that this work will have ups and downs, and finding the balance requires you to find ways to stabilize the time between the highs and lows so the climb (and the fall) is not so hard when they happen.

SEEKING PLATEAUS IN THE PROCESS

There is an old saying: "The higher you climb, the harder you fall." I can take that to mean that the further you grow in your career, the more advanced you become and the accolades you achieve in your life, the harder it will hurt when someone or something tries to take it away, or you struggle in your daily walk of this work.

What I would challenge you to do with this work, and within this book, is to find the plateaus between the mountains and the valleys.

Recently, I went on a college visit with my son Kenny to my alma mater: the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire. It has incredible programs, great sports teams, a wonderful music program, and a killer hill on campus. It's not an exaggeration to say it is the largest Midwest mountain around. That hill was part of the reason I gladly moved off campus my junior year; the thing was straight up—both ways. So, when the tour started, I knew we were going to have to climb that hill. Mind you, I hiked that thing in my late teens and now 20-some years later I was going to tackle it again? My mind was gearing up for how hard it was going to be and how I could save face when my heart rate was racing. But while I was worried about what would go wrong, something happened. We stopped halfway.

In all my years of hiking and pushing through just to get to the top, I missed the plateau halfway up! The five minutes we spent catching our