

The One Word That Educators Can Use to Reclaim Their Joy

Becoming a high school principal was my dream job—but sometimes I need the reminder



By [S. Kambar Khoshaba](#) — February 24, 2026 3 min read

Doing the work of an educator is tiring. Doing it right is even more tiring. A few months ago, I felt this degree of exhaustion before returning from winter break.

It was the Friday before we were scheduled to return to school for the new year. After a more relaxed workload while my students and staff were on break, I found myself dreading the return to our regular schedule. “I’ve got to start the ‘real’ work in just a few short days,” I found myself thinking. That’s when it hit me: I had lost my perspective.

Just four years earlier, it was my dream to become a high school principal in Fairfax County, Va., where I could be closer to family and experience the area’s rich cultural diversity. I can still feel my overwhelming joy at being offered the job of South County High School principal like it was yesterday. I remember thinking, “I *get to* work in a county I’ve been visiting for nearly three decades!”

So how had I allowed that joy to dim? How did my “get to” change to “got to?”

When I shared this question with my administrative team at a recent meeting, my team members agreed that they, too, could use the reminder to choose purpose over pressure. Together, we reflected on how we don’t just *have* to show up each day; we *get* to shape lives, open doors, and build a community where every student feels valued.

That simple shift in language lifted a weight in the room. “Got to” felt like obligation. “Get to” felt like privilege.

In that moment, I felt the joy return, not because the work had changed, but because my perspective had. I *get to* serve this community. I *get to* lead this school. I *get to* do the work I once only dreamed about.

Principals have to work at a breakneck pace. In addition to the regular stressors of the job that most people feel, educators are under unbelievable amounts of scrutiny from parents and other people outside of our schools.

Many adults think they understand our jobs because they were once students. I can assure anyone who has that mentality that public education, and high school life in particular, is very different today from even 10 years ago.

In addition to the perennial challenges of closing achievement gaps or making adequate yearly progress, we now also have to juggle [rising challenges](#) around staff attrition, artificial intelligence, and student (and staff) mental health. We must navigate [school shootings](#) and fentanyl overdoses. We have complicated policy decisions to make around cellphone bans and restroom access for transgender students. As I write this list, I see how I became distracted.

What we choose to focus on can play a big role in the length of our careers. As a former supervisor and mentor Thomas Whitley once told me, “Don’t let people steal your joy.” I have worked hard over the years to live by that motto as often as possible.

Yes, we will continue to have a laundry list of topics that will distract us from the joy we have of working with our students; however, there are ways we can revert back to a “get to” philosophy.

First, we need to be aware of how distractions and detractors can make you lose focus. As I often share with students, “hurt people hurt people.” If I’m hurting, it’s easier for me to pull you down to where I am than it is for me to lift myself up, make necessary changes, and improve. When principals are hurting in any way, we can’t be our best selves for our school communities.

To this end, I’ve learned the importance of saying “not now” to opportunities that fall in my lap if they would take away time from the parts of the job that remind me of my purpose. Sometimes, declining the chance to attend or lead a new training session frees up my time to work directly with students, which is the primary reason I entered our field.

Second, offer your colleagues the same encouragement you may need yourself. Several weeks after that initial administrative meeting in January, I had the pleasure of attending a department meeting led by one of my team members from that initial discussion. After a staff member brought up being tired from the demands of that day, my teammate discussed the importance of “getting to” do this work, which led to a positive group discussion about how privileged we feel to do this type of work each day.

Nobody ever said being an educator would be easy. If it were, anyone could be a public educator, and we know that’s not true. Having this calling doesn’t negate stress, but keeping the “get to” perspective in mind helps to have a more stress-resistant (not stress-free!) experience at work.

For me, what was once a dream job when I was in graduate school back in 1994 has become my daily reality. Now I “*get to*” live my purpose as a high school principal, making a difference in the life of students on a daily basis. It doesn’t get any better than that.

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