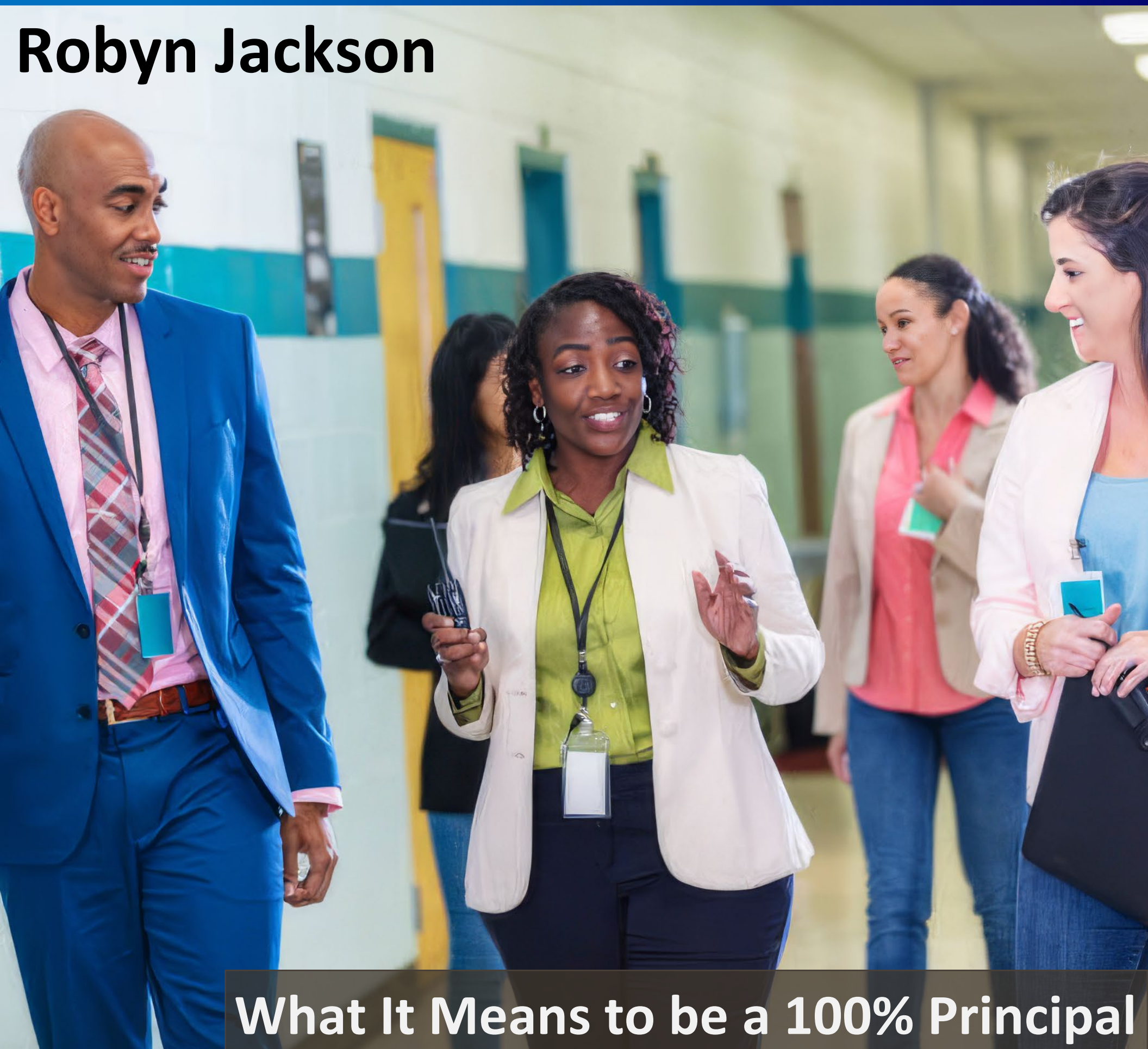


SUMMER 2025

LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Robyn Jackson



What It Means to be a 100% Principal

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What It Means to be a 100% Principal

Robyn Jackson, Ph.D., CEO of Buildership University and creator of the Buildership® Model, Washington, D.C.



For years, we've been trained to accept less.

We've been told to set "realistic" goals and settle for incremental progress instead of demanding 100% student success. We've been conditioned to celebrate marginal gains - a few more students reading on grade level, a small dip in discipline referrals, a slight bump in graduation rates - while quietly lowering our expectations for the students who still aren't making it.

We've been taught to set "achievable" targets instead of chasing what we know is possible.

And worst of all, we've been led to believe that 100% success is a fantasy - something nice to talk about in the generic vision statements we write, but impossible to realize in our schools.

That's the way leadership has always worked. That's the way we were trained to lead. And that's why so many schools remain stuck in an endless cycle of small improvements that never quite add up to the success we envisioned when we first stepped into this role.

But what if we refused to play by those rules?

What if instead of assuming that some students just won't make it, we committed to figuring out exactly what it takes to help every single student succeed. What if we then actually built the systems to make it happen?

That's what it means to be a 100% Principal.

A 100% Principal isn't just someone who believes that all students *deserve* success. They believe, fiercely, unapologetically, and unshakably, that every single student in their school can succeed. And they honestly believe that it's possible to build a school where that success for every student is inevitable.

That one belief changes everything.

Because once you allow yourself to believe that 100% success is possible, you stop making excuses. You stop settling for "better than last year." You stop managing degrees of failure and start building 100% success. You stop wasting time reacting to problems and start building the kind of school where success isn't just a platitude - it's a promise.

But here's the challenge: Most of us weren't trained to think this way.



The Three Big Lies That Keep Principals Stuck in Incremental Growth

For years, we've been operating under a leadership mindset that encourages cautious optimism at best and quiet resignation at worst. We've been taught to work within a broken system rather than repair and rebuild it. We've been conditioned to celebrate incremental progress because we were never given the tools (or the permission) to pursue 100% success.

If you're like most principals, you didn't step into this role just to "keep things running." You became a principal because you wanted to make a real difference. You wanted to create a school where every student thrives, where teachers are fully invested in the work, and where success is the norm. But somewhere along the way, you got stuck.

Not because you aren't working hard enough. Not because you don't care. But because you've been sold a set of lies - beliefs so ingrained in traditional leadership training that they feel like the truth.

These lies keep us locked in a cycle of small, incremental improvements instead of the bold, transformational success we dream of creating. They convince you to settle for "better than last year" instead of building a school where success is guaranteed for every single student.

If you want to become a 100% Principal, you first have to recognize - and reject - these lies. Let's break them down.

Lie #1: "Some Students Just Won't Make It"

This is the most dangerous lie in education, and it's one most principals don't even realize they've internalized.

No one says they believe it out loud. In fact, if asked directly, every principal would insist that they want all students to succeed. But look at how schools actually operate.

- We set "realistic" goals - 80% reading proficiency, 85% graduation rates - meaning that we are *planning* for some students to fail.
- We talk about "hard-to-reach students" as if it's inevitable that some kids will slip through the cracks.
- We accept that special education students, English language learners, or students from challenging backgrounds will struggle more, rather than questioning why our systems aren't designed to fully support them.

The unspoken assumption? Some students just won't make it.



This is leadership thinking, and it's what keeps principals stuck in incremental progress. When you believe that some students will succeed while others will struggle no matter what you do, you stop looking for real solutions. You start focusing on tweaking the system and making things a little better instead of building a school that works for everyone.

A 100% Principal doesn't fall for this lie.

Instead, 100% Principals make a radical, unshakable commitment:

➤ *Every single student in this school will succeed. Period.*

This belief forces you to stop looking at failure as inevitable and start identifying and eliminating the barriers that keep students from succeeding. It forces you to stop making excuses for why certain kids struggle and start building the systems that ensure they thrive.

It's not easy. It requires a complete mindset shift. But once you break free from this lie, you'll never see your school or your role the same way again.

It's not easy. It requires a complete mindset shift. But once you break free from this lie, you'll never see your school - or your role - the same way again.

Because when you finally allow yourself to believe that 100% success is possible, something unexpected happens.

And that's when a deeper fear starts to creep in.

Even if you believe 100% success is possible...even if you're willing to challenge everything you've been taught...

You may still find yourself asking, *"But at what cost?"*

That question leads us to Lie #2.

Lie #2: "Even If It Were Possible, It's Not Worth It"

Most principals don't reject the idea of 100% success because they don't care enough. They reject it because they believe it would break them and their staff to even try.

They've seen what happens when ambitious district initiatives demand huge results with little support. They've watched teachers struggle under the weight of one more mandate, one more accountability measure, one more impossible goal.

So when they hear about 100% success, they assume it means:

- **Perfection.** Every student getting straight A's, no discipline issues, no failures - an impossible, exhausting standard.
- **Pushing harder.** More PDs, more observations, more stress - on top of an already overwhelming workload.
- **More resistance.** Teachers burning out, students tuning out, staff resenting the relentless pressure to do more.

So they quietly settle for incremental improvements instead. But here's the truth:

➤ *Pursuing 100% doesn't require more effort. It just ensures your effort actually leads somewhere.*

You see, you're already working hard. Your teachers are already working hard.

So your problem isn't effort. Your real problem it's that so much of that effort is wasted on solving the same problems over and over again.



Chasing incremental goals still takes everything you've got. It's just that all that effort never feels like it's enough.

You're constantly putting out fires, plugging leaks, patching holes.

And every year, despite all that effort, the same issues keep coming back.

It's like playing one giant game of whack-a-mole.

But when you commit to 100%, everything shifts.

You stop chasing short-term fixes and start building toward something lasting.

You stop wasting time chasing compliance and start making real progress toward what actually matters.

You stop wearing yourself out trying to hold everything together, and start creating a school that runs smoothly - without you having to push every step of the way.

It's not that 100% takes *more* work. It's that it takes the right work. And, once you commit to that, the work gets lighter, not heavier.

That's the lie: that 100% will cost you more. The truth is, chasing anything less is what's actually draining you.

And yet, even when you believe 100% is possible...

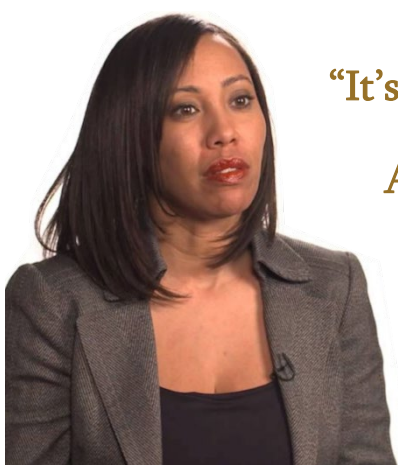
Even when you see that it's the only path that makes your effort worth it...

There's still one lie that keeps you from taking the first real step.

The belief that you can't do it with the staff you have, the district you're in, or the constraints you're under.

This is the most dangerous lie of all.

Because it convinces you that you're stuck.



"It's not that 100% takes more work. It's that it takes the right work.

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chasing anything less is what's actually draining you."

Lie #3: "Even If It Were Possible and Worth It, I Don't Have the Power to Make It Happen"

Even if a principal believes 100% success is possible, and even if they want it with whole heart, there's often one belief that still holds them back:

"I don't have the power to make it happen."

And honestly? That belief didn't come out of nowhere. They've been taught through policies, politics, and past experience that real change requires permission. From the district. From their superintendent. From the union. From staff. They've seen their best ideas watered down by red tape. They've felt the sting of pushing for something better and being told to "stay in their lane." They've tried to rally people around a vision only to be met with resistance, apathy, or burnout.



So it's no wonder they start to believe:

- "I can't move forward without my district's support."
- "My staff isn't on board, so I'm stuck."
- "We don't have the policies or the resources to make this work."

This is leadership thinking. It happens because we've been taught that power is something you're given, instead of something you can claim.

But you don't need anyone's permission to start building a better school.

➤ **It's not that the barriers aren't real. They are. But you can build 100% success anyway.**

You see, 100% success isn't about waiting for ideal conditions. It's about using what you have to start creating what you need right now. That means:

- You can define success by what your students actually need - not just what the district measures.
- You can start aligning your staff to a shared purpose - even if not everyone is bought in yet.
- You can redesign how your school functions - even if district policy never changes.

You don't need to be choked by the system and stay stuck. You also don't need to bypass the system in order to reach 100%. You can work within whatever conditions you have right now until you can reshape them.

Once you reject the belief that power comes from the outside, everything changes.

- You stop chasing district mandates and start creating a school that works for your students.
- You stop managing numbers and start building a system where success isn't left to chance.
- You stop waiting for permission and start leading with conviction.



This is what separates a 100% Principal from everyone else.

Because while other principals are waiting for change, a 100% Principal is building it right now, right where they are.

The Choice You Have to Make

Once you see the truth, you can't unsee it.

You've spent years doing exactly what you were trained to do - managing failure, working within the system, and chasing incremental progress because that's all that your leadership training taught you was possible.

And where has that left you?

- **Exhausted.** Tired of running on a treadmill that never gets you closer to your vision.
- **Frustrated.** Knowing deep down that your students deserve more but feeling powerless to give it to them.
- **Stuck.** Watching the same patterns repeat year after year, despite all the effort, energy, and sacrifice you pour into your school.

But now, you know why you've felt this way. You've been following a broken model, one designed to keep you playing small.

And now, you have a choice.

You can stay on the path of traditional leadership, where success is measured by how well you manage problems instead of whether or not you actually solve them. You can keep chasing numbers, making excuses, and settling for "better than last year."

Or you can become a 100% Principal.

A 100% Principal refuses to accept anything less than every student succeeding.

A 100% Principal doesn't wait for permission. They build success right where they are.

A 100% Principal stops managing failure and starts creating a school where success is inevitable.

The best part? You can start right now.

- Instead of believing that some students just won't make it, you commit to ensuring that every student succeeds - no exceptions, no excuses.
- Instead of fearing that 100% success will burn people out, you build systems that make success sustainable and automatic.
- Instead of waiting for permission, you take control of the process and start creating the school your students deserve.

The moment you decide to become a 100% Principal, everything changes.

Because 100% isn't just a goal. It's a mindset.

The second you stop accepting failure as inevitable, you start seeing solutions where others see roadblocks.

The second you stop settling for small wins, you start building the systems that make real success possible.

The second you stop waiting for permission, you step into the power you've had all along.

And when you make that shift your school will change. Your students will change. Your staff will change.

And most importantly, you will change.

Becoming a 100% Principal is a decision. And once you make it, you'll never look at your work the same way again.



*Dr. Robyn R. Jackson is a career educator and a best-selling author of 10 books, including the award-winning *Never Underestimate Your Teachers: Instructional Leadership for Excellence in Every Classroom* (ASCD, 2013) and the international best-seller *Never Work Harder Than Your Students and Other Principles of Great Teaching, 2nd Edition* (ASCD, 2018). She also hosts the popular *School Leadership Reimagined* weekly podcast, where she offers free training on how to use feedback, support, accountability, and culture to build a bigger vision, develop a better process, and achieve a brighter future for your schools. You can learn more and connect with Robyn at [MindSteps](#) and at [Buildership® University](#).*



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Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches in the classroom and at the building and district levels. Information on specifications and instructions to submit can be found online at theworthyeducator.com/journal.