

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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School-Based Management – Paving the way for next-gen educators

When school teacher Monica Sison accepted the post as head of the Avocado Elementary School (AES) in Sta. Catalina, Negros Oriental, she had already set in mind the task she wanted to accomplish -- ensure that the students get the education they are entitled to, even if it meant reviving the school that had been closed for six years.

The forerunner of the AES was burned down during hostilities between the New People's Army and government forces. The area was declared a no man's land as a result of the armed conflict. By force of the situation, the old school became non-operational from 1986 to 1992. Avoiding being caught in a crossfire, school children had to dodge the military and rebel's bullets – losing along the way their opportunity to be in school.

In 1992, then Governor Emilio Macias entered into a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with the NPAs. One of the provisions of the MOA was the establishment of a new school. This paved the way for the opening of the AES in 1994 by the DepEd Division Office in Negros Oriental. In 1996 Sison had to be assigned as ordinary teacher by the Division Superintendent to this far-flung school bringing with her a wealth of experience from teaching in private schools in Dumaguete City. Two teachers came ahead of her. Both did not stay long.

Sison could have chosen a far better assignment. After all, she topped the ranking of qualified personnel to fill the position of school teacher and she can choose posting in better-situated schools if she cares to. She, however, let her sense of mission decide. And so she packed her bags and found her way to far-off Sitio Avocado.

"The students, young and adults, who have lost six years of education really need help," stressed Sison. There were 66 students and the school had only grades 1 and 2 classes.

Sison noticed that there was already an established pattern in the area when she came in – when students are done with the first two years in elementary, they only have two "career path" waiting for them -- either they get armed or they worked in the farm. "I saw the urgency of breaking the cycle."

Sison then asked the District Supervisor of the Department of Education (DepEd) to allow her to open higher grade levels so that the children can continue with their schooling. Her request was not readily granted owing to lack of funds to hire new teachers. Eventually, when the higher grade levels were finally opened, some of the students were already adults yet were still in Grade 3.

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To say that Sison was multi-tasking was an understatement. She was actually doing so much at such a frenetic pace -- holding classes in all levels and running the school at the same time. She asked some of her adult students to act as her aide to look after the other classes when she was teaching in other levels. And because these adult students sometimes missed their class for acting as Sison's aides, she held Saturday classes for them.

"Never did I consider it a burden. It was an opportunity, in fact, a blessing," she said.

And the school thrived under her care. Eventually, positive changes set in -- DepEd was able to allocate funds to improve its facilities and hire additional teachers. Eventually, in 2005, DepEd appointed Sison as Principal of AES.

Today, AES has 250 elementary pupils, 27 in kindergarten and 125 high school students. This is sufficient proof that she has succeeded in bringing back the resident's interest in education which they have momentarily lost during the long years of conflict.

Under the School Based Management program being implemented by the Department of Education, school heads like Sison are at liberty to explore ways by which they can run the school most beneficial to the school community.

When the first batch of students graduated from high school, Sison and the other teachers helped them by looking for scholarship grants that could help bankroll their college education. "We approached the provincial governor, other private organizations and individuals. Talagang hindi namin pinabayaan ang mga estudyante," she added.

For her, to be able to send students to college was already an accomplishment. "For a life given to farming, venturing into college was indeed a big step for our students." And the people have been very supportive. "Some shouldered the tuition fees while the AES teachers provided the students' personal needs like uniforms and shoes.

To date, the community is supporting 11 college students at the Negros Oriental State University in Sta. Catalina, some 24 kilometers away from Sitio Avocado.

By March 2008, two students will finally get their college diploma in Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education -- they are Amado Callura and Irene Pandac.

Looking back, Sison said: "I saw in them the thirst for education. And that is reason enough for me to stay and give my best."

That Callura and Pandac took up education is an affirmation that they will carry the torch for the next generation of selfless educators. And Sison owns the bragging rights for making that possible.

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