

# Driving Rules for Principals

While driving down a busy interstate highway to visit one of my principal interns, I began to understand the many connections between safe driving and strong school leadership. The following 10 rules illustrate that relationship.

**Vision and Flexibility.** *Know where you're going and at least a couple of routes for getting there.* If I'm driving through an unknown city and miss a turn, it is quite helpful to have studied the map well enough to find an alternate route—which sometimes turns out to be better than the original.

Most educational leaders understand the importance of having a clear vision and communicating it often and well. However, once a plan or goal for achieving that vision is created, leaders often fixate on that activity as though that was the goal instead of just one path to achieving it. If you are stuck on only one way to move forward, you won't be able to adjust to important events or opportunities that may make a change of plans necessary. This doesn't mean that you're changing your vision or mission, just the means for implementation.

**Shared Leadership.** *Carpool whenever possible.* Shared leadership will always get you anywhere faster in the long run. You can't lead when there are no followers. But if you're all in the van together, you'll arrive in the same place at the same time.

**Practical Vision.** *Don't look too far in the distance.* If I'm looking too far ahead, I may crash into the car in front of me. I've found it helpful to be both nearsighted and farsighted when it comes to driving.

It is equally important to pay attention to the here and now as well as the "big picture" in pursuing your vision. There is a need not only to be seen by staff, students, and parents, but to listen and learn from what you see by being in classrooms, halls, and the lunchroom. Unless you understand the real, current needs of your colleagues, you can't help them to help you achieve your vision.

**"Although it may seem important to keep everyone moving forward at high speed... slower can be faster in the long run."**

**Communication.** *Always signal before you turn.* By signaling, I'm letting other drivers know my next move. The same sort of communication is important for staff and parents, particularly if it involves change. If you really need to make a change in direction, let everyone know ahead of time.

**Focus.** *Keep your mind on your driving.* It is so easy to be distracted while driving. I'm sometimes surprised to come up on a line of red taillights, forcing me to slam on the brakes or swerve to avoid a collision.

Much of the current research emphasizes leadership that is focused on improving student learning. Once a school has a shared plan that everyone supports, it is critical to use that plan as the focus for all other activities. It is dangerous to be distracted by interesting initiatives or ideas that are not part of the focus.

**Situational Awareness.** *Slow down at the first "road work ahead" sign.* If you notice the first warning sign, you'll be better prepared for the sudden shift of traffic lanes.

Pay equal attention to warning signs of conflict, confusion, and disengagement before they surge out of control. Sometimes there will only be a small clue.

**Consistency and Persistence.** *Obey the speed limit unless there's an emergency.* Although it may seem important to keep everyone moving forward at high speed all the time, slower can be faster in the long run. By moving slowly on the highway, you won't neglect directional signs, and you won't be stopped for speeding. In school life, moving slowly means you will realize important and sustainable change when it is embedded into the organization and becomes "the way we do business here."

**Balance.** *Relax and enjoy the scenery along the way.* Strictly speaking, this could be considered lack of focus. However, it is really about taking time for the school community to enjoy the improvement process and to celebrate even small accomplishments, as well as looking forward to results and improved test scores.

**Optimizing.** *Watch out for people who run red lights.* I've learned to check the intersection before accelerating when the traffic signal turns green. It is always better to be aware of red-light runners so that I can avoid an accident.

Unfortunately, schools can be minefields of naysayers or "attack dogs" who can have as negative an effect on school climate as a broadside collision. Being aware of these people is important.

**Reflection.** *Use the highway rest area when you're tired or lost.* Reflection is critical, especially for busy administrators. If you model reflection, it will help other staff members to do the same. Sometimes you must step away, at least mentally, from the pressure-filled arena of multiple demands and reflect on where you're heading.

Hopefully, these rules will help you drive safely and energetically through the sometimes rough and always challenging roads to lasting school reform. ■

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