

Leading During a Sea Change



Once upon a time—not so long ago, really—a principal's job of managing a school was much like that of a captain who keeps the ship running smoothly through calm seas. But veteran principals—those who have been on the job since the early 1990s or earlier—know from experience how obsolete that analogy has become. They have had to learn how to lead through choppy waters, uncharted territory, and gloomy weather, while keeping the crew focused and confident. Today's veteran school leaders also know they're likely to end their careers—whether in five years or 25—still adjusting to change.

We can and should learn a lot from the veteran principals who have led schools during this period of rapid reform and mounting challenges, including changing demographics, tough classroom management, safety challenges, and tight budgets wrapped with new and demanding mandates. They have learned how to adapt to new standards, assessments, and accountability while continuing to focus on individualized learning and instructional innovation.

Today's generation of veteran principals can tell us a lot about what it takes to keep schools and students moving forward in today's troubled climate. Before they retire—and even after—our most experienced principals can help the next generation of school leaders understand how foreseeing the need for change, introducing change, implementing change, and learning from change are essential elements of their job descriptions.

As we acknowledge the challenges of a changing educational environment, we should take a moment to recognize and salute the many long-serving school leaders who have found ways to adapt while continuing to do good work. They have led the way through uncharted waters of education, often helping teachers, parents, and students make difficult transitions. Many have also taken the time to explain to policymakers and administrators at the district, state, and federal levels the issues that impede school success, or to advocate for the resources they need to move all students toward greater achievement.

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Grooming Future Leaders

I hope that our veteran principals, who have demonstrated both focused and flexible leadership, recognize the opportunity to use their hard-earned experience for the benefit of their profession. They can be great mentors for newcomers, helping young principals address the myriad challenges facing them each day, while developing strategies to adapt to changes that lie ahead. Principals with a decade or more at the helm of a school are uniquely qualified to discuss what the job calls for on a day-to-day basis. We should make sure their guidance is heard.

Our veteran principals can also help by looking within their teaching ranks for future leaders who show the potential for understanding and responding to change. They should offer such teachers opportunities to grow by creating leadership roles for them.

A Legacy of Leadership

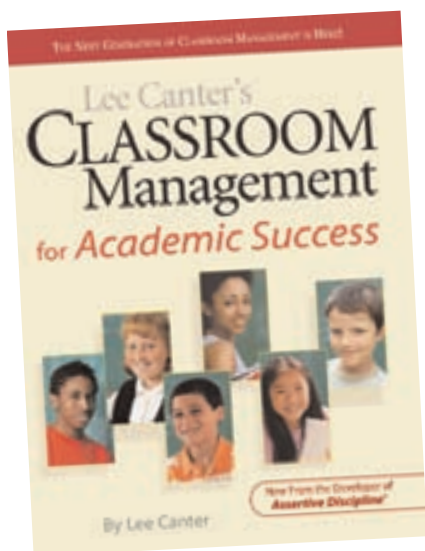
Even for principals envisioning the end of their accomplished careers, there is important work they can do. Our PALS (Principals Advisory Leadership Services) Corps was specifically designed to tap the mentoring potential of veteran principals. PALS pairs experienced principals with aspiring or new principals to help prepare them for the long hours and challenges the job entails. The coaching that veteran principals can provide gives newcomers a big head start.

We also encourage veteran principals looking at retirement to stay connected to the profession through emeritus membership in NAESP, which also includes membership in AARP. This affiliation offers legal liability protection, access to the latest information on issues facing principals, and discounts on books and other resources from our National Principals Resource Center.

The veterans leading today's schools are a special group. We should fully appreciate their ability to lead their schools through years of change and use that experience to build the skills of today's educators.

Instead of asking, “How will we get there?” we can turn to veteran principals to show us the way. ■

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