Until recently, retirement was a cult for loafers. Membership was virtually automatic for those 65 or older, and the only requirements were to wake up each morning and circulate your blood. But if you’re like most of your peers on the brink of retirement, you’re still relatively young. According to a survey conducted in 1998 by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the average age at retirement is 57. At that age, you still have nerves of steel, you’re technologically savvy, and you’ve raised multitasking to the level of an art form. Are you really ready to join the geezer glut or enlist as a Wal-Mart “meanderthal,” cruising aisle after aisle of products you don’t need? Not likely!
Principalship
Sixty-eight percent of people who are approaching retirement age report that they intend to work full time or part time after retirement, mostly because they want to. With today’s life span stretching to 80 years and beyond, turning 60 is no longer an end-stage event. Instead, it is the beginning of a new developmental phase. Neuroscientists have discovered that our brains don’t wear out with age, and that with exercise they have the power to adapt, change, grow, and even rewire into very old age.

So with decades at your disposal and an abundance of available work, the possibilities are immense. Suddenly life is plot-free, which means you’ve just been handed an extraordinary opportunity to consciously redesign your life. Your options run the gamut from volunteering to setting up your own business. Here are some possibilities:

**International Schools**

Maybe you still enjoy many aspects of being a principal, but desperately need a change of venue. Consider globetrotting. Picture yourself in an office nestled in a 17th century villa in Florence, or taking a break from reviewing a budget to watch the sun set over the Pyrenees. This can be your life if you tap into the network of international schools that serve English-speaking students around the world. Every year they host bustling job fairs to lure experienced administrators with attractive salaries, generous moving allowances, and airfare to return home for the holidays. The International Schools Services Web site (www.iss.edu) provides a detailed description of its recruitment service, answers to frequently asked questions about working abroad, information about setting up a professional file, and timelines for selecting candidates.

**Independent Schools**

If you’ve spent most of your career in public education, struggling with crumbling facilities, under-funding, over-regulation, bulletproof union members, and the labyrinth of the public education process, you may not realize that there’s a parallel universe of independent schools where educational philosophy, best practices, academic rigor, and meeting individual student needs are the rules of the day. In these schools, teachers must demonstrate high professional standards or find a new job at the end of the year.

Independent schools are private, nonprofit organizations governed by boards of trustees and supported by tuition, private gifts, grants, and endowments. Their enrollments range in size from several dozen to several thousand students. Their approaches to teaching and learning cover the spectrum from team-taught, project-centered, experiential classes to industrial-strength academics. And they can be havens for passionate administrators who yearn to put their stamp on education.

But it isn’t all heavenly. The demands of fundraising and local politics require long hours and excellent public relations skills. If the prospect still sounds intriguing, begin your investigation at the Web site for the National Associa-
tion of Independent Schools (www.nais.org). Many retired principals are collecting full pensions while earning hefty salaries in the private sector.

**Moving Up**

Surviving the principalship is great training for almost any other leadership position in your district. For example, most central office jobs require administrative experience, but rarely the levels of adrenaline you need as a principal. So if you want to remain in your district, you should identify your areas of expertise, assess your skills, and consider any of the following jobs as a logical next step.

**Human Resources.** As a principal, you know how to recruit, screen, interview, hire, supervise, coach, evaluate, and fire everyone from a health office clerk to a co-administrator. You’ve been up close and personal with the bargaining unit more times than you care to remember; and have probably committed large parts of the contract to memory. Put these all together and you’re in the human resources game.

**Pupil Services.** This is an interesting job that is part legal, part child welfare, and part public relations. Consider this option if you like policy, research, discipline, school safety, attendance, counseling families, and problem-solving in a format that changes every day.

**Grants Development.** Many districts rely on grants to fund innovative programs. This could be a great fit for you if you have strong communication skills, a good grip on current educational directions, and a taste for data and research. While some districts have grants departments, others employ a lone grant writer with a high tolerance for deadlines.

**Curriculum and Instruction.** This option is a no-brainer. Even the smallest district has someone who supervises learning. The job will include many of the following responsibilities: develop improvement strategies; plan, organize, and design curriculum and instruction for second-language learners and gifted students; organize assessment; plan and deliver staff development; and evaluate textbooks and other learning materials. It’s a huge job, but it can feel like a rest cure after leading a school.

**Public Information.** This job is not everyone’s cup of tea, but if you were blessed with a silver tongue and titanium nerves, it could be right for you. Your intimate knowledge of how schools work could give you a leg up over other public information officers who may have come from the communications field. You’ll be working behind the scenes, writing press releases, designing Web sites, creating brochures, and collaborating with grant writers and recruiters. You’ll be out in front during a crisis, dealing with the media or feeding lines to the people who meet the media.

**Back to the Classroom**

Some of my happiest hours as a principal were spent teaching kids. I loved stepping in when a substitute was late, or taking over a mentor’s class while she worked with a novice teacher. I know I wasn’t alone in feeling that, as principal, I was missing out on the best part of the education process. So, one of your retirement options is to find yourself a teaching gig.

Consider teaching your successors. All over the nation, there are organizations dedicated to raising and supporting a new crop of administrators. Investigate staff positions at principals’ centers, leadership institutes, university programs, or in districts that have formed their own administrative farm teams.

If your strength is in curriculum and instruction, check with local colleges or universities that have credential programs. Most hire adjunct professors to teach one or more courses. Junior colleges are another possibility, since many have child development programs. For information on college positions, start your search at www.HigherEdJobs.com.

**The Education Industry**

Administrators longing for a career change may lose heart, mistakenly seeing themselves as one-trick ponies. But many jobs in the education world rely...
on people with the skills that you’ve been perfecting for years.

**Publishing.** Educational publishing is a billion-dollar industry that depends on a steady supply of writers, editors, trainers, and consultants who have on-the-ground school experience. As a former principal, you have plenty to offer. The more you know about curriculum and best practices, the greater the possibilities for employment.

**For-profit organizations.** Education supports a vast constellation of private companies that are in the business of helping teachers and administrators get better at what they do. To locate these companies, monitor the junk mail that arrives at your front office each week. All of those colorful fliers for conferences, seminars, workshops, professional development courses, training sessions, and speakers were sent by potential employers. To find out more information about employment opportunities, dial the phone number listed on the flier and ask to speak with the professional development director. Also, look into the Bureau of Education and Research (www.ber.org), which is the largest private company in the nation that presents seminars for educators.

**The Nonprofit World**

The problem with the term nonprofit is that you immediately picture yourself living like Mahatma Ghandi. In fact, many not-for-profitees earn lucrative salaries in luxurious surroundings. My first adventure in the nonprofit world included a building with a doorman, floor-to-ceiling windows on the 17th floor, and a black marble restroom with fresh-cut flowers. In addition, the job offered frequent travel and a generous per diem in some of my favorite cities. There are several Web sites that can introduce you to nonprofit opportunities. Start with Idealist.org, a global clearinghouse for nonprofit jobs and volunteer opportunities, or OpportunityKnocks.org. Both sites list positions that require administrative experience, educational expertise, and a nose for politics and fundraising.

**Author! Author!**

Writing and consulting are two more ways to translate your professional experience into a whole new career. There are dozens of educational publishers who prosper by offering new titles every season. They are constantly prospecting for authors with fresh ideas, have editorial staffs trained to shepherd promising manuscripts to the finish line, and will gladly provide detailed guidelines for submitting your proposal. You can visit your bookstore or library for how-to books on writing. If you know any published writers, ask for copies of their proposals to use as models.

Writing a book is a long process. You need a good idea and the willingness to put in the seat-time. But there are few thrills greater than strolling into a bookstore in any major city and finding your book on a shelf in the education section. Being in print is a real door-opener for consulting, speaking, publishing articles, and radio and television interviews.

**Retooling**

Thinking about a career change is a huge step, one potentially so overwhelming that you might give up before you ever get to the resume or interview. So think of it as a research project with many little pieces that you can assemble in your spare time. Start slowly, make a file, and keep notes. If it’s been years since you revised your résumé, you may be surprised to discover how much you’ve accomplished.

To jump-start the process, check your computer software for a résumé feature. With one click, you may be able to choose from a variety of formats, freeing you to concentrate on content. You should also consult OpportunityKnocks.org for the list of Top 10 Resume and Cover Letter Mistakes to Avoid. Here are some suggestions to help you get started with the process:

- Make a list of every committee,
commission, or task force on which you have served. Describe each in active, product-oriented language. For example: “designed K-12 math assessment, created interactive science curriculum, analyzed achievement of minority students, mentored new administrators, published guidelines for preschool start-up program, and piloted electronic report cards.”

If you’re applying for a similar position in the education community, you may want to lump your experience into categories, such as Instructional Leadership, Curriculum Design, Policy and Programs, Professional Development, Articles and Publications, Fellowships and Institutes, and Community Service.

If you’re applying for a job outside of the education community, analyze your activities and emphasize the skill aspect, rather than using educational jargon. Use words like: directed, trained, organized, produced, supervised, and published.

Read the description of the position for which you are applying and use the same language in your résumé and cover letter.

Plan on revising or reshaping your résumé every time you apply for a job. Tweaking a basic résumé just takes a few minutes. Adding, highlighting, or deleting information can bring your job experience into sharp focus and catch the eye of a potential employer.

Moving Day

Leaving your school can be a truly bipolar experience: so liberating that you can scarcely contain your delight, and at the same time as painful as a divorce. After all, you’ve been at the center of a community of kids, not in a corporate office full of cubicles. No matter how you feel about the staff, the parents, or the job itself, you probably haven’t changed your attitude toward kids much since you were a new teacher. And with the kids, you’re a real-life hero.

Always put the best face on your departure. Take time to write a letter to your staff and to the community. Be sure to thank them for the wonderful opportunity of leading the school. Cite the strengths of the school and the work that you have accomplished together, expressing optimism for the future. Allude to your own future with enthusiasm but not too many details. Keep your announcement brief and heartfelt.

Saying farewell to students can take many forms. You can have a series of assemblies, walk from class to class, write a letter to all students, have an open-house in your office so students can drop by for personal farewells, or just stand at the entrance for a week and speak to as many kids as possible.

These are the retirement goodbyes you’ll remember for years to come.

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The Peer Assisted Leadership Services (PALS) program is designed to engage retired and experienced principals to give back to their profession by supporting new, newly assigned, or even experienced principals through mentoring.

www.naesp.org

The Office of Overseas Schools of the U.S. Department of State provides education for dependent children of American business people and government employees stationed in countries all over the world. For information on a principal position overseas, go to www.state.gov/m/a/os.