

A dirt path winds through a lush green field, leading towards a bright, hazy horizon. The background is a soft-focus bokeh of green and yellow light spots, creating a sense of depth and optimism. The path is light-colored with some grass growing between the tracks.

Beyond the Principalship

WHAT SCHOOL LEADERS NEED
TO KNOW AND DO TO PREPARE
FOR POST-PRINCIPALSHIP CAREERS.

By Susan McLester

Part of any principal's essential professional development training should include a good understanding of how their hard-won skills can apply to new professional opportunities. Whether it's tackling a new challenge, affecting a greater impact on education, or following a personal passion, principals have more options than they may know for what their next jobs could look like.

Not surprisingly, studies show that principals remain loyal to education. They tend to stay in the education field, either inside or outside of a school setting, once they have retired from a principalship. Results of studies such as the 2012-2013 Principal Follow-Up Survey by the National Center for Education Statistics show that of more than 114,000 principal respondents 78 percent stayed on their jobs at the same school the following year, and of the 12 percent who did leave their jobs, more than 60 percent were working in high-level district office positions.

A new trend—and one that is disturbing to education professionals such as Steve Tozer, a professor in Educational Policy Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), and founding coordinator of the UIC Ed.D. Program in Urban Education—is the reality of principals signing up for shorter-term commitments. Polls answered in 2015 by NAESP's more than 1,000 first- and second-year principals in its National Panel of New Principals group, show that 40 percent plan to move on after five years.

Tozer credits this shift to the additional layers of stress, too-short principal preparation programs, and lack of collegial support for the shorter-term principal tenures. "Nobody wants to accept three-to-five years as the new normal," says Tozer. We need to look more carefully at causes, offer more support, and make sure new principals are not discouraged early on, because their long-term presence has a huge impact on student achievement."

But for principals ready to move on—either after a full career as principal or because they

are looking for a new challenge—there are a range of perspectives from the field. Here are six snapshots of post-principalship careers, from the district office to the publishing world.

Principal-Plus

Marrying people upon request, meeting with seniors during lunch hour, and negotiating city contracts on weekends and after 4 p.m. are just a few of the extra duties Emile Carafa takes on as town mayor in addition to his responsibilities as principal of Washington Elementary School in Lodi, New Jersey.

Carafa, a 41-year education veteran and 24-year principal in his home town of Lodi, says family support, a history of political advocacy for education issues, and the confidence that his leadership and organizational skills could well serve his community were driving forces for him to seek the mayorship.

"Despite my job as mayor, I was clear that the school comes first," says Carafa. "I am a phone call away, but only for something important."

Carafa says laying the groundwork and working collaboratively are key elements to his ability to manage both jobs. A member of the city council for 15 years, he has maintained an active interest in the politics of his community, has stayed abreast of trends, and has acted as a voice for education. Because of this, he says other council members trust his leadership skills and support him by working as a team. Washington Elementary's strong culture and climate are other factors that Carafa says have freed him up to successfully take on the extra responsibilities of mayor.

"I have always been very civic minded," says Carafa, whose self-described "excessive amount of energy" allows room for him to take on even more roles, as an adjunct professor at a local university, and an active advocate for Common Core standards and assessments in local, regional, state, and national levels.

As far as transferable skills from the principalship, Carafa says he did not have much new to learn. "I only have to apply what I

ip

know as a principal and instructional leader to my role as mayor.”

Carafa says communication and listening skills, and thinking on your feet are extremely important for both jobs. “These are the same kinds of skills that help principals relate to a variety of people, such as students, teachers, staff, and parents,” he says. “They can also apply to the larger community a mayor deals with.”

Superintendent

Ironically, it was the example of an ineffective principal that inspired Michelle Price to move from teacher to principal, and then from assistant superintendent to superintendent in her small rural district of Moses Lake, Washington.

With a goal to create a more positive school culture than the one she taught under as an elementary school special education teacher, Price was encouraged by her colleagues to move up in the district chain of roles because of her superior organizational skills.

“Education is my passion,” says Price, whose history includes five years as a teacher, nine years as a principal, seven years as an assistant superintendent, and seven years as superintendent. “I knew I could make a bigger impact on instruction as a superintendent, which is the same reason I moved from teacher to principal.”

Price says essential personal skills needed to be a superintendent include honesty, sincerity, empathy, and the willingness to empower others to take risks. Other skills different from the principalship that she has had to learn along the way include a “huge amount” of public speaking and working closely with community organizations.

Probably the greatest learning curve, says Price, has been expanding her expertise to gain knowledge of transportation, food, budget, and personnel within the district. These included understanding the issues of being a secondary school department head, nurturing relationships with school board members, and finding ways to be more efficient with bus schedules across the district’s 465 square miles, as well as

choosing furniture and making construction decisions about new schools being built.

Price likens the role of a superintendent to being a CEO of a corporation with a \$100 million budget, 1,000 employees, responsibility for the safety and education of more than 8,000 students, and ongoing engagement with the community, all while keeping up with state and federal legislation that directs the enterprise. “Your heart has to stay in the classroom to do this work,” says Price, who also adds that, even women who are generally more tied down and less mobile than men—often shouldering the major responsibilities for raising kids and keeping a household going—can still be successful at the job.

Director of School Improvement

Steadily progressing from social worker to middle school teacher to principal to district director of school improvement, Michael Perkins has continued to seize fresh opportunities as they arise, satisfying his desire to continually take on new challenges.

With 11 years in education, Perkins, the under-40, Austin-based educator, fits the profile of the younger, shorter-term principal, having stayed in that position only five years. “I can’t even imagine staying in a job for 25 years,” says Perkins, who agrees that, like many people his age, changing jobs regularly is just a part of life.

It was his facility at data analysis and embedding adult learning into the school culture that earned him his present job as director of school improvement, says Perkins, who works with under-performing schools in the district to help increase student achievement.

When asked about skills that would transfer to other jobs, Perkins had to reflect a moment. It was never a strategy to use his various roles in education as stepping stones to other jobs, though he acknowledges that the ability to unite a range of stakeholders under a common vision and to walk them through evaluating and re-evaluating data and instructional practices would be experiences valuable even outside of the education field.

“I knew I could make a bigger impact on instruction as a superintendent, which is the same reason I moved from teacher to principal.”



DO THIS

Interested in the ideas in this article? Try these steps to get started.

- Push the edges of your key areas of competency. For example, become an expert in data analysis, which all industries value.
- Follow your other passions and gain experience in them while you’re still in the principalship. They may end up being your primary post-principalship calling.
- Get published. There is no need to write a complete book; writing articles is another way to demonstrate your expertise.
- Develop your network early on. Join organizations and make connections.

Organization Executive

Being a registered lobbyist is exciting, says Mark Terry, deputy executive director of the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association (TEPSA), who advocates for education issues at the state level. A former teacher, assistant principal, and 23-year veteran principal in an inner-city district, Terry characterizes the principalship as “a hard job that I loved,” and one that he “misses a lot.”

Terry sees his current job as an extension of his former role as a principal, from which he retired in 2013. “I have a foot in each world,” he says. “I advocate for education issues and for principal training, and with meetings all over the state, I can add time on to visit schools in different areas,” he says.

Communication, with an emphasis on persuasion, listening, and speaking to large groups of people is a skill his current job requires and for which he feels well-prepared. “If you can talk to a lunch room full of sixth-graders, you can talk to anyone,” he says.

Terry says his role as an organization executive and advocate is fulfilling in that he is in a position to affect real legislative change in key areas such as early childhood education and principal professional development. But when speaking of the principalship, his words belie a nostalgia for his past role. “If it’s not a calling, you shouldn’t be a principal. If it is a calling, do everything you can to stay in the job.”

Education Publishing

Todd Williford had plans to stay for the whole 30-year tenure when he signed up to be an elementary school principal in Statesboro, Georgia. But when, after 21 years in education and 14 years as principal, he was approached by an executive from the ClassWorks education publishing company, he just felt that it was time to do something else.

“My kids were getting older, I had known the company representatives for a long time, and it was a way to stay in education, which I love,” says Williford, who also adds that the pay is basically lateral but there’s a chance to “earn much more.”

After only eight months on the new job as a sales rep, Williford is still getting his bearings. The most significant change is the wide-open flexibility of a role that takes him to schools throughout the state. “Unlike the principalship, where everyday emergencies play havoc with your day’s planned agenda, I have complete control of my schedule and so need to be highly organized. The

downside is having to be on the road and away from home two to three nights a week.”


Like Terry, the public relations skills built into the principalship serve Williford well in his new role. Although officially in sales, he often acts as a consultant, as he understands the needs of school staff, and can address the issues that keep principals awake at night. Applying his team-building skills to working collaboratively with other company sales reps has been another benefit.

Williford also adds that the advocacy skills NAESP provides principals through their National Leaders Conference have been invaluable in speaking with potential clients at both site and district levels.

Consultant

For 40-year career educator Laurel Schmidt, a desire to master fresh challenges has always compelled her to seek new roles and learning opportunities within education. As a 20-year elementary school teacher in the Los Angeles and Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School Districts, she changed grade levels every couple of years, and was later a principal and director of student services. As well, Schmidt developed parallel careers as an arts educator and author—publishing *Gardening in the Minefield: A Survival Guide for School Administrators*, and two other books, which helped pave the way for her 16-year “retirement” career as an education consultant.

Being an independent consultant is a welcome change from the repetitive nature of administrative tasks principals so often do, says Schmidt. “I wanted to continue my opportunities to educate people outside of the confines of the district.”

Among Schmidt’s consultancy programs are partnering with major museums in New York and Los Angeles to offer arts education to teachers. She also gives inspirational speeches to educators and helps museum docents understand how to integrate Socratic-method questions into their tours. Like Williford, Schmidt says the primary challenges of working for yourself include being organized and operating independently. “You don’t have a boss. You are the engine that makes things happen. You have to love research and reaching out to meet new people. Being a self-starter and being self-motivated are key to success.” 

Susan McLester is a freelance education writer in Berkeley, California.