

Making best use of your Principal expertise post-retirement

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Three principals meet at the regular get together lunch held once a term in Sydney, organised by former Principal Liaison Officer, Brian Ralph. Like all those there, they feel they still have much to offer. The discussion around them reveals the variety of volunteer and influential leadership roles that their fellow retirees are pursuing within their local communities. A few others are working part time for university education faculties or for the Department in short-term contract roles. Only one does casual relief teaching. Most feel this is not an option as they feel it would be awkward, uncomfortable teaching in someone else's school. Two have been teaching Science and English in China while another has been providing leadership support to principals in developing nations. Looking around the group, the three principals observe so much talent – a pool of people with a wealth of valuable educational leadership, management experience and institutional knowledge that is largely overlooked as a source of support for schools and school leaders.

Retired principals are like a pot of gold waiting to be tapped. As educators they have a vested interest in helping practising principals improve but their professional distance allows them to be analytical and unbiased in their recommendations. They have strong relationship building skills, professional acumen, strong understandings of educational goals and challenges, and strong familiarity with the day-to-day workings of a school and issues faced by school leaders.

Generally this amazing resource is neglected in Australia. Other important professions make better use of their retirees. The Federal Government funds the National Pro Bono Resource Centre to facilitate retired lawyers becoming involved in pro bono legal work so as to "best utilise retired lawyers' skills and expertise" and "unlock the full potential of what retired lawyers have to offer".ⁱ A recent TED conversation asked: "Retired doctors. How do we make better use of them? How can we continue to harness their skills, knowledge and experience to improve society?"ⁱⁱ

Other countries do it better in regard to utilising the skills of retired principals. In the US, the American Institute for Research recommends that principals make use of retired principals to support them with the time consuming yet required competency observations required for teacher accreditation.ⁱⁱⁱ In Massachusetts, retired principals are used as mentors, taking advantage of their desire to stay connected and their ability to step back and be reflective about the profession. At the University of California Berkeley, the Principal Leadership Institute (PLI) utilises a staff of retired principals as university field officers to work with candidates for the MA and Administrative Services credential on observing practicum and course presentations. In South Africa the Principal to Principal (PTP) program calls for retired principals who are interested in mentoring other principals and connects them with interested schools. In a synergistic relationship the mentoring retired principal walks with the practising principals "through the school day, week, month, year and they look together without imposition of views at the challenges of educator/leader interaction, timetables, school discipline, educator capacity, facilities, educator availability, vision, mission, community engagement, and all aspects that make up a school and the challenges for the leadership of the principals."^{iv} It also connects retired Deputy Principals and Heads of Department to coach and mentor practising colleagues. The goal of PTP is that it will become a normal post retirement move for principals who have much wisdom and energy to offer.

In Australia, a number of retired school leaders are seconded into head office by bureaucrats keen to make use of their knowledge of every aspect of how a school operates. However, while an excellent use of this amazing resource, selection is rather ad hoc and is based on asking "Do you know anyone who might be

interested?”. Principals at a Department run retirement seminar in 2011 proposed the idea that principals (and possibly deputy principals as well) should be invited on retirement to submit an EOI for future consultancy type work stipulating those areas in which they felt they had particular expertise. This database would then be the source for offers of Departmental work rather than the at times nepotistic method currently in use. Like many good ideas it is yet to be taken up.

Gorman’s research *The role played in the community by retired school principals*^v found that retired school principals have much to offer the community bringing the time, adequate resources, health and energy, knowledge and experience as well as the need to spend their lives in useful and meaningful ways. The findings of the study suggested that most retired principals are active in the community as participants and as leaders. In an endeavour to structure a personally satisfying retirement lifestyle, they use their leadership skills developed in schools in order to focus on activities that encompass all facets of their lives.

Back to the three principals at the luncheon.

Bruce Stavert, Jim McAlpine and I had each been approached by practising principals to help out with aspects of school evaluations. We decide to start up a small consultancy offering our services for school evaluations and program reviews. Our own experiences tell us that while school directors and councils encourage school level evaluations, finding the qualified expertise to do these is often a challenge. Academics can offer the pedagogy of evaluation but some can be scornful of school education and the final recommendations do not always demonstrate true understanding of the needs of school education and are often impractical to implement. Since the cost at times far outweighs the value received, we decide to use the top casual teacher rate as a basis for working out charges. We feel confident that we can bring a critical yet impartial eye based on our leadership experiences and educational pedagogy to our observations that will help time-poor practising principals identify areas of strength and factors that need short and long term improvement and provide them with practical strategies to guide future school development. Our slogan is *Educational Evaluations for Educators by Educators*.

Responses received by the three of us already show that practising principals like the idea of principals helping principals. Perhaps this is the answer. Rather than waiting for a systemic or government response, principals approaching retirement should create their own opportunities, touch base with connections in areas they feel they have particular expertise and ensure that colleagues and regional staff know that they are going to be available. Using the premise that every principal’s experiences are unique and every school is different, retired principals can help practising principals to make decisions courageously, based on the best data available - that from their own schools.

Old principals should never die. While they live on in the hearts and memories of the students, parents and communities they served so long and so well, they can also live on in a new generation of principals who they can help guide through the myriad of responsibilities that the job entails.

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References

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