

SETTING MY FINAL SAIL

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AWSP Executive Director

This is my farewell column for *Washington Principal* magazine, as I will be embracing retirement at the end of August. Transition causes one to step back and reflect on the history of the profession we dedicate our lives to.

WHAT'S DIFFERENT?

STUDENTS

Today, paddling students is out. Student smoking areas are gone. Fashion is different, and rap changed from something nuns did with rulers to a genre of music. Cell phones transfixed kids into thinking everything and everyone they need to know is behind a screen. In a recent study, author Kathryn Lewis asserts kids are “actually — neurologically — different from those of past generations.” And because of technology, “Children today are fundamentally different from past generations. They truly have less self-control.” And yet, they still come to school with curious minds — it continues to be our responsibility to feed and nurture their curiosity.

TEACHERS

The research on instruction over the last 40 years is now articulated in three different frameworks in Washington state. In the late '70s,

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we sat on the launching pad of that research with Madeline Hunter. Computers, laptops, the internet and Google transformed today’s instruction. Bloom’s Taxonomy is still valid, but teachers can no longer languish at the bottom of it. Today, email and social media connect parents to teachers 24/7 and provide a platform to shout teacher complaints from the town square.

PRINCIPALS

Speaking of frameworks, principals now have their own, which not only shines the spotlight on the principal, but on the role of principal’s supervisor. The relationship between a principal and their supervisor gained attention in part because of lots of research reaching the same conclusion — if you want to improve a school for students, the principal’s leadership is critical.

Paying close attention to the achievement of subgroups of our student population is a fairly new

phenomenon, historically speaking. Neither achievement gap nor opportunity gap were in our lexicon in the days of painted fire hydrants. Our response to state test results was to examine our curriculum. Today, tracking subgroups of our students forces principals to look at the individual student to see what we should do next to help them achieve standards. There is an expectation today to stick with the student until they reach standards, and that expectation permeates the entire system.

In 1976, schools were not the location of choice for mass killings. While today we slip in and out of a sense of urgency about school safety, principals in the '70s were primarily concerned with safety in the gym, the shops and the chemistry labs. In a way, it was a more emotionally peaceful time between air-raid drills of the '50s and the lockdown drills of today.

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WHAT'S THE SAME?

One thing will never change, and that is kids still learn best from teachers who care about them as individuals, in spite of their unpredictable behavior, their funny smells, and whether or not they can pay for their lunch today.

Though the principal's role has seen many social and educational changes in the past 40 years, one thing hasn't changed and isn't likely to in the future — the uniquely American oversight of public education. The annual migration of 687 decision-makers (100 Senators, 435 Congresspersons, 147 state legislators and 5 local board members) to their nesting places in D.C., Olympia, and back home, produces new rules for principals to implement, often while struggling to find resources. The constant changes and mandates makes leading sustained improvement in schools akin to sailing in an unpredictable windstorm — our destination remains the same, but we keep making massive changes just to try and keep the winds from pushing us off course.

My conclusion from all this reflection is the principalship is occasionally a goofy, but always glorious place to spend one's adult life. I will leave the profession a much better man than when I entered it solely because of those I encountered along the way. To all of you who've helped chart my course, I say thank you. Keep on sailing. ■



Gary Kipp has served as AWSP's executive director since 2003. He has more than 40 years' experience as a teacher, assistant principal, principal and assistant superintendent.

Humor me!

Created by **David Ford**, Retired Washington State Principal

