Principals around the country are stepping down from their leadership roles. The mass exodus is part of a national event – Student Principal for a Day. “Experiential leadership training is the way to go,” says Sean Firth, acting teaching principal at Milyakburra School. “Simulations, scenarios and things like Student Principal for a Day are valuable ways to learn and practise the skills needed to lead.”

Milyakburra is a remote school on Bickerton Island, about 600 kilometres east of Darwin. Two students from the school took part in last year’s event as well. “I saw it as an opportunity to give some of our students ownership over their school and how things are done,” Firth says. “I chose two students to be principal for the day, as shared leadership is how things are normally done in Indigenous communities. The students gained insight into what I do each day and they [gained] confidence from being able to make decisions and follow them through. They wanted to go down to the beach that day and I challenged them to make it an educational experience and they did.”

The benefits of participating weren’t limited to the students. “Their parents were incredibly proud, too,” Firth says, “and there were a lot of positive comments from other community members. The other kids all want to be principal for a day now, too. It improved our image in the eyes of the community and gave the two students real insights into leadership and what it takes to run a school.”

Paddy McEvoy, principal at Adelaide’s St Aloysius College, believes the national campaign provides an excellent opportunity for students to better understand and value the varied role of principal and hopefully inspire future leaders. “There are many students interested in becoming teachers but some students don’t see themselves in that leadership role until they come closer to it,” McEvoy says.

McEvoy mentored a Year 12 student, Diandra, who took part in last year’s event. Diandra spent the day heading the inner-city all girls’ school of about 1200 students. Her tasks included welcoming new reception students and their families, attending a site meeting for the new Year 12 centre and addressing the primary assembly. “I’ve been lucky in my career to have always worked with women who have inspired me,” McEvoy says. “I do think more and more women are seeing a pathway to leadership in education.”

Cobden Technical School in Victoria was another school that took part in the national initiative last year. “Student Principal for a Day fits in well with the aims of our school,” says Michael Smart, assistant principal at Cobden Technical School in Victoria. “We see it as a great opportunity to promote leadership to our students.” Cobden’s student principal was a year 12 attendee. As a school captain, she was no stranger to responsibility and relished the opportunity to make a difference with school programs.

As well as running a leadership program to help decide on a mobile phone policy for students, she also experienced some of the more mundane parts of being a principal – including opening mail and banking. “Giving our student principal a chance to see the other side of the principal’s door helped her relay that back to students,” Smart says. “It helped promote the work that principals do.”

And would these principals recommend Student Principal for a Day to other schools? “I would recommend it to others because of the message it sends out that the school is an open system where student and community input is valued,” Firth says.

Student Principal for a Day happens on June 4. The event is open to primary and secondary schools around the country and is co-ordinated by Principals Australia Institute. National sponsor Sherpa Kids also supports the day.

For more information, go to sp4d.edu.au.