



The Power of the Principal™ Advocacy in Action

Research-Based Recommendations to Guide Federal Policies

National Association of Elementary School Principals

Sustained school improvement requires accomplished, proficient principals.

A well-established body of independent research amassed over the past 30 years irrefutably demonstrates that principals improve student achievement and create long-term school success, particularly in pre-K through grade 8 education.* Elementary and middle-level principals are the primary catalyst for creating a lasting foundation for learning, driving school and student performance, and shaping the long-term impact of school improvement efforts.

They are chief instructional leaders responsible for strengthening teachers' effectiveness, integrating learning across grades, and ensuring that students achieve academically at all levels, including the critically important transition from early childhood education to formal schooling in the primary grades.

If we want better schools, we must support, strengthen, and invest in principals.

Federal education improvement policies and programs must ensure that principals have the authority and autonomy to lead effective learning communities and to mitigate social and economic conditions that impede student success. The current debate surrounding the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization and the implementation of new state and local initiatives to improve education provides an ideal opportunity to do so. NAESP offers eight recommendations to establish a sound framework for developing federal education policies that improve schools by strengthening their principals.

1. Acknowledge the Core Competencies of Effective School Principals

Federal, state, and local education policies must recognize and support the core competencies of effective school principals. These include mastery of the following abilities, skills, and behaviors:

- Lead schools centered on student and adult learning;
- Set high expectations and standards for the academic, social, emotional, and physical development of all students;
- Demand content and instruction that ensure student achievement meets or exceeds agreed-upon standards;
- Create a culture of continuous learning tied to student learning and other school goals;

- Gather, manage, analyze, and use data and knowledge to inform decisions and measure progress; and
- Actively engage a school's community to create shared responsibility for student performance and successful development.

These six core competencies are derived from NAESP's professional standards, set forth in a landmark publication titled *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*, which offers practical strategies to strengthen principals in their central role as instructional leaders. The recommendations in this document are informed by these research-based standards.

2. Dedicate On-Going Professional Development that Strengthens Principals' Core Competencies

Current social, economic, and political realities require principals to accomplish ever-greater academic goals with ever-shrinking resources, prepare young people with higher order skills befitting a global society, analyze and use increasingly complex data, and incorporate rapidly changing technology in instruction and learning. To meet these demands—and many others—principals require high-quality, forward-looking professional development.

Programs in ESEA must be strengthened to build the capacity of principals. Program quality will be held accountable by aligning and including the core competencies of effective school leadership.

Yet only 3 percent of Title II funds under ESEA are specifically allocated to professional development activities for principals. (The vast bulk of these funds are allocated to teachers.) More must be done at every level of education policy development. Principals must have access to a wide range of learning opportunities that extend and build upon their formal academic preparation, enable them to master emerging school-improvement strategies, and support their knowledge of rapidly changing skills and technologies. Such opportunities include professionally delivered events outside of their schools; site-specific, job-embedded learning; and online training.

3. Support Standards-Based Induction and Mentoring Programs for Early Career Principals

Building-level principals typically operate as lone decision-makers on many issues and are isolated from peers who can offer insight and wisdom to solve problems, avoid or manage crises, and network for professional growth. Yet research has proved that mentoring programs designed to build peer-to-peer teams are highly effective and cost-efficient ways to reinforce and extend principals' academic preparation, close gaps in that training, and share best practices. Evidence also shows that principals who engage in mentoring programs that are aligned with NAESP's professional standards (*Leading Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*) are more successful in setting a shared vision and developing a culture that drives school improvement, particularly those who lead low-performing schools.

All principals, especially early career principals who are facing their most challenging years in the profession, must be provided with access to standards-based mentoring programs. This peer-to-peer interaction improves a broad range of leadership characteristics, including:

- Nurturing teacher and staff development to strengthen classroom instruction;
- Building and sustaining a culture of learning among adults and children;
- Strengthening communications and relationships with parents, caregivers, and community stakeholders;
- Facilitating the sharing of knowledge, insight, and best practices; and
- Building relationships and communicating effectively with state and district officials.

The Federal Role in Education: How Much Is Enough?

The appropriate federal role in education is to promote equity and access for all children, provide targeted resources to assist states and local districts, and support state and locally developed curriculum and instruction.

Unfortunately, No Child Left Behind (NCLB, the current law) is a one-size-fits-all approach that inaccurately captures student academic achievement and misidentifies schools in need of improvement. NCLB's over-reliance on standardized test scores to determine adequate yearly progress (AYP) forces schools to narrow their curricula at a time in our nation's history when schools should focus on

expanding curriculum so young people are prepared with higher order problem-solving skills and knowledge.

Federal policies should ask educators to set high expectations, such as adopting college- and career-ready standards and disaggregating data on subgroup populations, but they also must support state and locally developed accountability systems, curriculum, and instruction to best meet the specific, unique needs of students in their communities.

4. **Strengthen Elementary Principals' Knowledge of Early Childhood Education**

Early childhood education is increasingly at the center of the discussion to improve graduation rates at so-called “dropout factories” where more than 50 percent of students leave high school before graduation. This shocking statistic represents lifelong misery for thousands of individuals and a terrible loss of human potential for the nation. If educators and policy makers are serious about reducing this appalling dropout rate, our schools must provide the steady support children need when they’re 3 and 4 and getting ready for elementary school—not when they’re 13 and 14 and already in academic trouble.

Elementary principals have a unique opportunity to bridge early childhood education with formal schooling through community-based collaboration and outreach. Through this collaboration, principals can foster mutually supporting professional development for staff and teachers, align early childhood learning goals with school-based curriculum, and facilitate student assessment strategies that are age and developmentally appropriate. Consequently, it is imperative that principals participate in professional development activities that encourage high-quality early

learning environments so they can:

- Gain knowledge and develop the capacity to create a “continuum of learning” from pre-K through grade 3;
- Work collaboratively with early childhood education service providers and families;
- Engage the school community to partner with early learning programs to set a shared vision for understanding early childhood development;
- Help teachers identify high-quality curriculum and developmentally appropriate practices and develop effective transitions for children from early learning or home settings to primary grades;
- Provide safe, supportive early learning environments focused on the whole child—his or her intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and nutritional needs;
- Integrate best practices in early learning programs with formal school curriculum and standards; and
- Use data effectively to make instructional decisions.

5. **Encourage Comprehensive, Fair, and Objective Principal Evaluation Systems at the Local Level**

Recent changes to existing programs such as School Improvement Grants and the development of new federal initiatives such as Race to the Top emphasize the roles and responsibilities of principals. To meet program requirements, states and local districts have hastily devised principal and school leader evaluation plans that quantify “effectiveness” based in significant part on standardized test scores. As a result, many of these plans lack clear performance standards and research-based practices that accurately identify the true characteristics of a high-performing principal.

The voice of principals is essential to the development, design, and implementation of principal evaluation systems.

Principals must be afforded opportunities to provide ongoing feedback as systems are developed and implemented. Efforts to evaluate the effectiveness of principals must be developed at the state and local level, and like teachers, principals must receive a comprehensive, fair, and objective performance evaluation. The federal government should encourage states to

- Develop effective principal evaluation systems based on multiple and meaningful measures of the competencies needed to improve student learning, and
- Include professional development plans in evaluation systems that acknowledge the unique characteristics of each school and its community.

Effective Leadership Evaluation Systems

In 2010, NAESP initiated a broad effort to examine the impact of recent federal policies on principal competency and evaluation through a partnership with Johns Hopkins University and the American Institutes for Research to examine key research-informed indicators that substantiate the competencies of effective school leadership. This important work also examines state and local evaluation practices and the degree to which research is being appropriately applied to these evolving practices.

In 2011, NAESP expanded this initiative to include the National Association of Secondary School Principals to ensure that the voice of all principals is represented in this landmark work. This collaborative effort will result in a common set of guidelines to support states and local districts in the development of their evaluation systems. The guidelines are scheduled to be released in spring 2012.

6. Reinforce Support for Principals as Key Ingredients in School Improvement Plans

NAESP strongly opposes any model of school reform that requires the automatic removal of the principal without review— even those models targeting the nation’s perennially low-performing schools. Such proposals perpetuate high teacher and principal turnover, both of which ultimately contribute to low-performing schools.

Instead, principal leadership review and evaluation should be conducted as the first step of any school intervention or turnaround plan. The following guidelines should inform federal, state, and local policies:

- Principal evaluation systems must be developed at the state and local level. They should be fair, objective, and comprehensive; based on core competencies of effective school leadership; and draw from

research-based best practices.

- Each principal in a low-performing school must be offered the opportunity for an objective review and evaluation by a highly trained mentor, coach, or veteran principal who has a proven record of success.
- Once the principal leadership review and evaluation is completed as part of the school intervention or turnaround process, the local school district should have the authority to determine the next plan of action regarding the principal.

7. Develop Accountability Systems that Include Growth Models and Multiple Measures

Accountability systems that determine student achievement must assess the many factors that define academic success and—most important—must be developed by state and local educators. Sound practices include the following:

- Federal policy must provide incentives for state and local assessments that include growth models and multiple measures of student performance (both formative and summative) to accurately gauge social and emotional development, language fluency and comprehension, creativity, adaptability, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

- Assessment data should inform instruction; reflect students’ progress toward academic proficiency; and be fair, flexible, and authentic.
- Standards, curriculum, and assessments must be closely aligned to be effective, and any assessment data must be available in a timely manner for practical or instructional use.
- Standardized assessment scores must never be used as the sole or primary criterion to measure student performance; rate, grade, or rank principal, teacher, or school effectiveness; allocate funds; or take punitive measures against schools and/or school personnel.

8. Support Innovative Models and Empower Principals to Drive their Implementation

Federal policies should support community-driven innovative models such as pre-K through grade 3 alignment and community schools to help improve academic achievement.

The positive, lifelong impact of high-quality early learning experiences on children is well established, particularly for those who are at risk for underachievement. Yet communities, states, and the nation as a whole generally have made only marginal strides in creating and supporting an infrastructure that provides all children and families with access to these crucial early learning opportunities that are essential to our nation's educational, civic, and economic prosperity. Federal policies can and should support the countless principals who are developing high-impact, innovative practices that strengthen schools and support teaching and learning.

These accomplished principals—and their colleagues in every type of school, in every kind of neighborhood, and in every state—should be heard and heeded in our national debate about school improvement, honored for their commitment to ensuring that every child in the United States has access to a quality education, and applauded for their ability to remain focused on the best interests of children despite rising expectations and dwindling resources.

Simply put, a great teacher can create and sustain a great classroom, but ***only a principal can create and sustain a great school.*** To make sure that every school is a great school, federal policies must support every principal in his or her professional growth.

*All of the recommendations and data presented in this document are based on independent research. NAESP welcomes the opportunity to provide citations to all interested readers.

About NAESP

Founded in 1921, NAESP is a professional organization serving elementary and middle school principals and other education leaders throughout the United States, Canada, and overseas. Directly and through its extensive national network of state affiliated associations, NAESP represents some 62,000 principals who serve 34.3 million children in grades pre-K through grade 8. The Association believes that the progress and well-being of the individual child must be at the forefront of all elementary and middle school planning and operations. Further, NAESP members accept the challenge inherent in research findings that the development of quality education in each elementary and middle school depends on the expertise, dedication, and leadership of the principal.

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