

Remembering Dr. Samuel G. Sava: Our Nation's Most Distinguished Principal (1931-2008)



Gail Connelly,
Executive Director, NAESP

It was a simple, noble purpose that shaped the leadership of Dr. Samuel G. Sava, Executive Director Emeritus of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP). He believed our democracy is critically dependent upon high-quality education for *all* our children. Born to immigrant parents from the island of Rhodes in Greece, Sava was inspired by our country's commitment to public education, which ensures that even children from the direst circumstances have the opportunity to fulfill their dreams and to achieve success.

When Sava, known simply as "Sam" to his friends and colleagues, passed away recently following a long bout with cancer, the education community mourned the loss of a living legend who embodied the heart and soul of a distinguished principal—one whose focus on children never faltered. His efforts to enhance the stature of the principalship and inspire greater recognition for the critical role of principals were matched by his strong advocacy of measures to overcome inequities and to provide "safety nets" of support for our most vulnerable children. And though the terminology would not become popular until decades later, Sava led NAESP's longstanding stance on developing the *whole child*. In pursuing these ideals, he pioneered a brilliant mélange of strategies and programs.

Developing and Sustaining Professional Standards

NAESP's first convention in 1921 was a meeting of 51 elementary school principals who set out to "raise the standards of professional services they rendered." When Sava became NAESP's fourth executive director in 1981, he advanced the pursuit and execution of professional principal standards to new heights, simultaneously raising the stature of the principalship and the expectations for principals to challenge themselves to be increasingly professional. For example, he worked with then-Secretary of Education Terrell Bell to help create the Blue Ribbon Schools Program as well as the National Distinguished Principals program—which we celebrate this week—to annually honor those principals whose schools meet the academic and social needs of all students and firmly establish community ties with parents and local business organizations.

In addition to honoring exceptional principals and gaining stature for principals by publicizing their critical role to the public, Sava also worked hard for measures to make principals more knowledgeable and better prepared. To this end, one of the many accomplishments during his tenure was the development of NAESP's *Standards* series, including *Standards for Quality*

Elementary and Middle Schools, Standards for Early Childhood Education, Standards for Quality School-Age Child Care, and Proficiencies for Principals.

NAESP has maintained its position in defining and developing standards for principals, releasing in April 2008 a revised and updated version of *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do*. This is a handbook designed to help principals structure efforts to ensure that all students—and adults—learn and perform at high levels. Effective principals know that they must manage data and knowledge to inform decisions and measure progress of their students, staff, and school. The new handbook reflects Sava's belief that principals should set and embrace high standards and accountability, while insisting that their key role as instructional leaders encompasses understanding and advocacy for educating the whole child.

Engaging the Whole Child and the Whole Community

Sava trusted that superior-quality, individualized learning for every child could override otherwise insurmountable obstacles. Consequently, he was a tireless advocate for early childhood education because he recognized the value of learning during a child's most critical early years. He also fought for enhanced services for children with disabilities, championed after-school initiatives, and supported parents in their role as a child's first teacher.

Perhaps Sava's greatest strength was bringing people together to overcome professional and political challenges. An integral part of his leadership style was working collaboratively with a range of individuals and organizations that spanned education associations, government agencies, and foundations. Sava always ensured that the authentic voice of the principal was heard in local, state, and national settings. Never losing his focus on children, he was able to convene groups and bring them to action. It was in this role that he served as one of the original architects of Project Head Start and gained government funding to help launch *Sesame Street*.

Sam Sava stands as a powerful example of effective principal leadership. His commitment to continuous improvement and high standards, coupled with attention to all levels of community engagement, reflect what works and is replicated in effective schools today. We at NAESP salute him as our nation's most distinguished principal and honor his legacy on behalf of our nation's children.