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## The 21st Century Principal: Leading, Learning, Building

**I**mprovement. Accountability. Investment. Impact. These are the new words in K-12 education. We have replaced old standbys like “reading, writing, and arithmetic” with data systems, student interventions, and embedded professional development. It is certainly a new and exciting time of change for public education and the American classroom.

As a community, we have set high expectations for our schools as we seek to create a lasting foundation for learning that impacts every child and drives both school and student performance. Nowhere are these expectations more important than in our elementary and middle schools, which provide the building blocks all children need for success, both in school and in life.

In recent months, the nation has focused on increasing its investment in our public schools in the belief that additional resources can have a long-term impact on school improvement efforts. At the center of this national commitment are our elementary and middle school principals, a catalyst for both school reform and child empowerment.

As principals, the student is our first, last, and primary concern as we seek to address the needs of the whole child and ensure that each is given the tools and opportunity to succeed. Our teachers are gaining the attention they have long deserved as we provide them with the resources, support, and professional development necessary to deliver a world-class education for every child, regardless of their school's zip code or socioeconomic demographics.

It is the principal, though, who brings it all together, providing the management and instructional leadership needed to trigger the improvements we all seek. It is the principal who empowers the teacher, encourages the student, and involves the community in ways that have lasting impact.

Why, exactly, is the role of the elementary and middle school principal so essential? First, we know that our elementary and middle schools are the initial learning portals for 21st century opportunity. Success in secondary school, college, or career depends, in large part, on the skills and knowledge

that are acquired in the earlier grades. A more rigorous and relevant learning experience in the later grades requires a solid elementary education, and it is the principal who leads the improvement efforts needed to deliver the results our policymakers, community leaders, and families now expect.

Second, principals are key instructional leaders in the learning process and fulfill a vitally important role in achieving student success. By partnering with teachers on effective practice, professional development, resource allocation, and student learning, principals are the primary gatekeepers of both the process and the outcome. Effective principals have the vision, courage, wisdom, and professional knowledge to lead learning communities that create opportunities for all children to achieve their highest potential.

Finally, elementary and middle school principals are on the front lines, implementing the improvements our classrooms so desperately seek. At the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), we are working to ensure that all principals are high-quality, effective leaders and educators. Principals take their responsibility for student achievement seriously, and they are continually learning, gaining the knowledge and skills to lead 21st century schools and deliver on 21st century learning expectations.

Collectively, the members of NAESP, 28,000 elementary and middle school principals, have made a commitment to improve student achievement through school improvement and reform. That is our pledge as economic stimulus dollars begin to move to our school districts, where principals at each school site will be involved in making decisions about how best to use these funds for achieving the greatest impact.

True school success begins with the principal. As conveyors of best practice, catalysts of learning, and protectors of the whole child, our nation's principals drive schools to lead, learn, and build. As we redefine what a successful school really is, we know we will find a quality principal there, orchestrating a complex and dynamic learning community, driving for desired results, and putting children at the center of it all.