



A Preferred Future for School Leadership - 05/08/2008

➤ **Principals' Perspective** » April 08, 2008

by Gail Connelly and Gerald N. Tirozzi

As we travel across the country listening to principals discuss the needs of their schools and communities, we are struck by the endless optimism they have for the future of the children they serve. While many people will say that schools are resistant to change, we know otherwise. Principals are excited about the changes occurring in society and seeking creative ways to best meet the needs of an increasingly diverse and technologically savvy student population. These same principals, who are busy making plans for the upcoming school year to create and maintain high-achieving schools, need all of us to increase the volume on conversations about the future of school leadership. Because in order to properly prepare our children for the 21st century, we must dramatically change the 20th century models of principal leadership, embracing instead the notion of principals as change-agents and instructional leaders.

Transformers vs. Copers

A recent Wallace Foundation study of school leaders in high-needs districts described two distinct leadership styles—transformer and copers. Transformers, the study noted, focus on creating a culture in which each child can learn; copers, on the other hand, were struggling to avoid being overwhelmed by the increasing challenges at their schools. The punitive nature and unfunded mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act, the current version of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—coupled with additional responsibilities not written into their original job descriptions—has many principals coping with the unprecedented challenges facing our schools. Principals continue to manage the day-to-day responsibilities required in their buildings, but they are also busy securing funds from local businesses to help support their school's programs, serving as spokespeople to engage the community and garner support, and working with local reporters to promote their school's success and to increase positive perceptions about education.

While many principals are busy coping, they are also striving toward transforming schools despite the lack of resources to do so. Unfortunately, many of our schools are ill-equipped to handle increasingly diverse populations, technological upgrades, and a global economy that requires schools to prepare a workforce vastly different than in the past. It's more than a little daunting, yet our school leaders continue to accept new roles and responsibilities and perform at extraordinary levels to ensure academic success for students.

A Glimpse into the Future

Each of our associations is heavily engaged in conversations to identify more resources and support to develop principal leadership at all levels—pre-K, elementary, middle, and high school—so that principals can be the transformers that are desperately needed.

- NAESP just completed an 18-month process with pre-K-8 principals to examine trends in leadership, education, and society. The findings informed the development of new standards for the publication *Leading Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*.
- And NASSP completed a two-year process with a principal-led task force to explore many of the same issues and led to the publication *Changing Role of the Middle Level and High School Leader: Learning from the Past—Preparing for the Future*.

In both cases, our associations relied on the expertise of veteran and novice principals who know best what is needed to be successful for students at each level of pre-collegiate education. NAESP and NASSP are ready to guide these conversations to help principals served by each of our associations with the evolutionary changes occurring in our schools. We recognize that some conversations will need to center on how to bridge the divide between principal preparation and practice by blending the rigorous coursework with the realistic expectations of today's society. We also recognize the need to help principals lead

diverse learning communities; effectively integrate technology into the curriculum; and ultimately set the standard as lead advocates for learning in the future. Further, we realize that principals must be uniquely prepared to respond to the changing needs and learning demands of students during each level of their school experience.

We urge stakeholders, such as university professors and policymakers, to join our discussions about the future of school leadership because if we don't speak with one voice about increased funding for education, a sensible and realistic reauthorization of ESEA, higher salaries, and more autonomy for principals, then the conversations will all be for naught. We want all principals to consider themselves transformers, not copers, and be able to create a preferred future for our nation's children.