

## Advanced Principal Certification—An Idea Whose Time Has Come

School reform and enhancing professional standards for principals is old news. But in this era of high-stakes testing, federal and state accountability programs, and intense interest among taxpayers and government leaders in school-level performance, the demands for accountability among principals has never been greater. Consequently, their jobs have never been more challenging.

Dedicated school leaders are stepping up to meet this challenge. Many leaders are discovering, however, that traditional principal preparation programs fall short of equipping them to completely fulfill their role as instructional leaders. They are realizing they must have the experience and vision to promote collaborative work environments where the expertise of the entire faculty is pooled and the knowledge and skills of the strongest teachers influence all instructional staff and thus benefit every student.

Principals tell us they need help with building the capacity of teachers and mobilizing a school's resources for learning, and they are committed to their own professional development and growth toward that end. A national advanced certification system would meet these needs head-on with a new model for identifying and recognizing high-performing principals.

Enter the Advanced Certification for Educational Leaders (ACEL). With the encouragement of our two organizations, along with the American Association of Schools Administrators, the National Middle School Association, and other major leadership organizations, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards has embarked on a process to define and validate standards for accomplished, effective principals. This initiative will help motivate principals, strengthen the prestige of the profession, and raise awareness of the critical role of principals in ensuring successful outcomes for students.

As one might expect, the National Board is doing its homework in creating the certification. They are drawing upon the significant research and knowledge evidenced in our landmark publications: NAESP's *Leading Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do* and NASSP's *Breaking Ranks* series. The goal is to align national certification requirements for principals with professional development opportunities afforded by state-level principals' associations and other agencies. Further, the National Board is collecting input from more than 5,000 educators—including 2,500 principals—to ensure that the certification's core propositions reflect all



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essential criteria to identify current and future accomplished educational leaders.

This initiative comes at an ideal time. There is growing consensus in the field about the attributes of highly accomplished school leaders, yet there is no reliable way to measure the performance of these school leaders—or to recognize and reward their accomplishments. Like board-certified doctors, architects, and other professionals, principals who achieve advanced certification will demonstrate that they have met or exceeded advanced standards for their profession.

Not only is it becoming increasingly difficult to attract principal candidates, but, just as troubling, it is harder to retain effective and experienced administrators. We need to offer these invaluable school leaders incentives to enter and then remain in the profession. An advanced certification system would do this in several important ways. Ideally, principals who earn the ACEL would benefit from the prestige it conveys and the achievement it signifies. In building the capacity of principals to lead schools more effectively, the certification program would expand career opportunities by paving the way to increasingly responsible administrative positions at the district level and to leadership positions in other districts. And we expect principals who earn advanced certification would be rewarded financially.

Reflecting the recognized need for such a certification, there is growing support from both the private and public sectors. The Chicago Public Education Fund has made a significant financial investment in the program's development. The state of North Carolina has pledged its support for the certification when it launches in 2011, and other states will likely follow. The federal FY 2009 Omnibus bill, enacted in March, commits \$1 million for principal certification, and President Obama's proposed FY 2010 budget provides for an additional \$1 million.

Such support clearly indicates that the case for the advanced principal certification is strong, yet no argument is more compelling than this: Principal certification advances student learning. Advanced certification distinguishes an instructional and organizational change agent who has both the experience and vision to build and sustain a learning community dedicated to helping all students achieve. We congratulate the National Board for its foresight in working with our principals' professional associations in creating the Advanced Certification for Educational Leaders, and we look forward to honoring those certified exemplars of the profession who achieve it.