

No Strings Attached

It's an understatement to say that these are uncertain times for education and for educators. We face more questions than answers, more issues than solutions, and more qualms than assurances. Even so, I am certain about one thing: Elementary and middle-level principals put kids first, always.

That's no small accomplishment. The pressure on principals has never been more significant: ensuring that schools perform at ever-higher levels with ever-shrinking budgets; preparing students to succeed in a world adults can scarcely imagine; juggling often conflicting state and federal guidelines; and operating—day in and day out—in a high-stakes pressure cooker of hyper-accountability, just to name a few.

Principals are able to focus on their true priorities of teaching, learning, and supporting children because in part they are masters at preventing mounting external pressures from disrupting the important work of schools. No matter what, principals know that teaching and learning must continue uninterrupted. But as the federal government's role in education grows larger and more active, I wonder if state and local autonomy—vital to ensuring that schools remain rightfully connected to neighborhoods and families—is giving way to “one size fits all” thinking. Does the promise of greatly needed funds come with so many strings attached that principals will find themselves in a bind?

The most recent example, but not the first, is the Obama administration's proposal to make sweeping changes in the way Title I funds are dispersed. The proposal, part of the administration's plan for reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), would require states to either adopt the common core standards currently under development by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers, or certify with their public colleges or universities that existing state standards are sufficiently rigorous to ensure that students are college- or career-ready.

As this issue of *Principal* was going to press in early March, it wasn't entirely clear that the proposal would survive or even that ESEA would be authorized. And, who knows? The proposal simply might be a trial balloon sent aloft to test the political winds. Still, it represents another federal initiative




that potentially erodes important local and state authority and so warrants NAESP's attention.

Just to be clear: If enacted, the proposal would mean that states that choose not to comply with one of the aforementioned options would be ineligible to receive Title I formula funds, and they would receive a lower priority for consideration of the Department of Education's other competitive grants, including Race to the Top funds and School Improvement Grants. It would be the first time in the history of Title I that funding would be tied to federally required standards. NAESP believes that this proposal should be excluded from the ESEA debate for three central reasons.

First, we support the proposed outcomes of common core standards, and we applaud the work of the NGA and the CCSSO in developing them. But make no mistake: We support principals and children more. In particular, we support the nation's most vulnerable children—those who need the extra boost from Title I funds—most of all. The playing field for these children is rocky enough. Little good can come from jeopardizing the resources that help them overcome such obstacles.

Second, the common core standards have yet to be vetted and refined. It's likely to take educators months to analyze the standards' suitability and fit on a state-by-state basis, and rightly so. It's premature to designate the standards as the ultimate litmus test for whether schools receive—and children benefit from—Title I funds.

Finally, the proposal perpetuates an increasingly troublesome strategy: a hint of tantalizingly large—and sorely needed—funds for schools, districts, and states that commit to federal rules; the delivery of resources to a select few; and the peril of harsh punishment if schools and principals don't overcome long odds in short order.

NAESP embraces setting high standards for principal performance and high expectations for student learning. Our accomplishments over our 89-year history verify our commitment to both goals. The question now crystallizing is this: Do the strings attached to the resources educators need actually hold them accountable, as they are designed to do, or instead hold children hostage? We say snip the strings restricting Title I and free up principals to help our neediest children. 

“Does the promise of greatly needed funds come with so many strings attached that principals will find themselves in a bind?”

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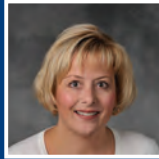
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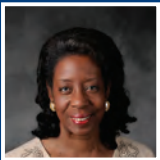
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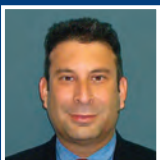
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