40 Years and Counting With NAESP

It seems as if it was just yesterday that I sat in my superintendent’s office as he uttered the words, “You are being appointed to the principalship.” As I drove out of the parking lot with instruction to report immediately to my new assignment, my grip on the steering wheel became tighter as the fear overcame the excitement. I didn’t have any administrative experience or coursework.

Even more frightening was the fact that I was only 23 years old!

As I began to navigate my new office, my old principal called to congratulate me on my appointment. He suggested that I consider attending an upcoming conference for principals that would be very helpful to me as a new principal. The conference was the annual convention of the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Attending this meeting during my first year as a principal was the beginning of a successful career in the principalship and the start of my love affair with NAESP.

Hooked on NAESP Conference

Going to my first conference was like going to the county fair: hundreds of principals, seasoned and new; a kaleidoscope of school-related sessions; outstanding general sessions; motivational speakers; opportunities to network with others in the same profession; displays of new and innovative teaching materials; and hundreds of opportunities to build my capacity as a principal. Needless to say, I was hooked! I remain hooked after more than 40 years of attending the annual event. Over the past four decades, I have never entertained the notion of staying home. Even 12 years after retirement, I am still excited about attending the event.

I view the event as a way not only of keeping my skills current, but also of paying it forward for those who have entered the pipeline of the principalship and who are still in the business of improving the lives of young people. The knowledge I gain at conferences has been extremely helpful as I work with principals around the world as a mentor trainer for NAESP and as I provide leadership to the New Principals Mentoring Academy in my own district in Norfolk, Virginia.

What has kept me coming back year after year? The answer is simple. I believe that being a professional means being active in the professional organization that advocates for you.

Ten Benefits

My experiences at annual conferences have played a large role in my many successes as a principal.

1. As a new principal, exposure to new and innovative teaching and leadership strategies helped me to become a strong instructional leader and eventually develop and lead Virginia’s first model elementary school.
2. I gain new ideas from principals who have been successful in implementing various educational programs.
3. I learn from my colleagues and other presenters about what works and what does not. The opportunities to share and get ideas from fellow principals are endless. It’s professional development in real time.
4. I became involved in the governance and decision-making structure of the organization. By attending I was able to participate in the Delegate Assemblies, serve on committees, and vote on issues important to principals. These experiences fueled my desire to become an officer in the Association. This goal was fulfilled when I was elected president of the Association!
5. I have received over 40 years of the best leadership development available anywhere.
6. Through opportunities to interact with my principal colleagues across the United States and other countries, I have broadened my horizons. The networking opportunities are tremendous.
7. It’s like going to a spa. A few days can refocus, energize, and encourage you to continue to look for ways to improve your practice.
8. Over the years, attendance at conferences has provided me the opportunity to step back and reflect on my job as it related to the larger framework of the profession.
9. The conference provided a conduit for me to make presentations, serve as a facilitator and evaluator, and participate in many focus groups.
10. I have listened to some of the greatest, most knowledgeable speakers in the world and interacted with some of the best researchers in the field and authors of numerous best-sellers.

Finally, for me the NAESP conference has evolved into a reunion of kindred spirits—principals who share my passion for the profession and more importantly, for the children of this nation. I have gained an extended family.

In looking forward to the 2012 NAESP conference, I anticipate new learnings, networking, exciting speakers, new innovations and products, best practices, and reconnecting with my extended family. See you in Seattle!

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