Better schools and higher levels of student achievement require an investment in the preparation of and support for effective principals.
This document is an updated and annotated version of the February 2013 NAESP policy brief.

The following discusses leading research to improve and strengthen policies to better prepare, evaluate and support the nation’s principals. Historically, principals have been overlooked in federal policy despite 30 years of research that shows the correlation between strong school leadership and the improvement of schools.
As a nation, we must do a better job of recruiting talented individuals with strong leadership skills into high-quality principal preparation programs and build the professional capacity of principals to create the optimum conditions for teaching and learning in every school. Our nation’s 95,000 public school principals influence three million teachers and 55 million students, pre-K through grade 12, and are pivotal to ensuring that all students achieve and thrive in safe and healthy school environments.

While leading research substantiates that teachers have the greatest influence on student achievement, studies also validate the critical role of the principal. Principals recognize and support teachers and create high-functioning schools, which are integral to increased student achievement. The evidence about successful schools is clear: A great teacher makes a great classroom, but only a principal can lead a school’s success and sustain long-term improvements.

Research, including recent reports by the Wallace Foundation, indicates that recognition of the principal’s role has been long overlooked. In its The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning study, Wallace noted that “school and district administrators, policymakers and others declared principal leadership among the most pressing matters on a list of issues in public school education.”

Federal policies must acknowledge and support principals’ ability to create the optimum conditions of teaching and learning in every school. School leaders must be evaluated on appropriate measures, based in part on how well they build and support effective teachers and teacher leaders. Principal evaluation must take into account factors beyond student growth and achievement. It also must consider the individual needs and challenges of the learning community and how much authority the principal actually has to make improvements.

Yes, we should evaluate our principals, but we must evaluate the principal as a whole. But we should avoid overuse of standardized assessment scores as the sole or primary criterion to: measure student performance; rate, grade or rank principal, teacher, or school effectiveness; allocate funds; or take punitive measures against schools and/or school personnel.

Efforts that address principal preparation, evaluation and school reform must be focused on building the capacity of principals to improve schools. Current accountability systems continue to place too much emphasis on student test scores to gauge school, teacher and student performance. Standardized tests are blunt instruments. They were originally intended to help educators improve instruction and student learning, but now are being used as strict delineators of educator quality without taking into consideration the context in which they are used.

If we are truly committed to improving both learning and performance, we must embrace shared leadership for principals and teachers. As detailed in Learning from Leadership: Investigating the Links to Improving Student Learning, the largest in-depth study of education leadership to date in the United States, researchers identified links between the principal’s focus on improving instruction, the teacher’s trust in school leadership, and shared leadership at the school to improved student performance on math assessments. Policy should be strengthening those bonds, not forcing a false choice among instruction, trust, and shared leadership.
What the Research Tells Us About Effective Principals

To address longstanding issues related to accountability, assessment, and effectiveness, NAESP has developed the following platform around eight areas supported by the research as a means to ensure competent instructional leadership.

1. Acknowledge the Core Competencies of Effective Principals
2. Develop Comprehensive, Fair and Objective Principal Evaluation Systems
3. Develop Accountability Systems That Include Growth Models and Multiple Measures
4. Hold Principal Preparation Programs to Common High Standards
5. Insist on Standards-Based Certification, Induction and Mentoring
6. Invest in Identifying and Retaining Effective Principals
7. Dedicate Ongoing Professional Development That Strengthens Core Competencies
8. Strengthen Elementary Principals’ Knowledge of Early Childhood Education
Acknowledge the Core Competencies of Effective Principals

To develop a system of effective principal evaluation, we must build a common understanding of what effective school leaders are and do. Central to this is defining the very job of the principal. As the Wallace Foundation has noted, we need to “create clear, rigorous job requirements that detail what principals and assistant principals must know and do, and that emerge from what research tells us are the knowledge, skills and behaviors principals need to improve teaching and learning.” Without such clear definitions, it is nearly impossible to know whether our principals are effective or not.

Below are some indicators of effective leadership, based in part on leadership standards, such as those in NAESP’s landmark publication, Leading Learning Communities: What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do. Using that publication’s definition of effective principals, fortified by Wallace research, NAESP recommends a common definition of “core competencies of effective school leadership” so that states and local school districts can have comparable performance goals and share data, and to ensure equitable distribution of an effective principal in every school. This definition includes:

- Lead schools in a way that places student and adult learning at the center;
- Set high expectations and standards for the academic, social, emotional and physical development of all students;
- Demand content and instruction that ensure student achievement of agreed-upon standards;
- Create a culture of continuous learning for adults tied to student learning and other school goals;
- Manage data and knowledge to inform decisions and measure progress of student, adult and school performance; and
- Actively engage the community to create shared responsibility for student academic performance and successful development.
Develop Comprehensive, Fair and Objective Principal Evaluation Systems

Across the nation, states and school districts are developing principal evaluation systems similar to those being created for classroom teachers. Unfortunately, SEAs and LEAs have often hastily devised principal and school leader evaluation plans that quantify “effectiveness” based in significant part on standardized test scores, meaning many of these plans lack clear performance standards and research-based practices that accurately identify the true characteristics of a high-performing principal.

Comprehensive, high-quality principal evaluation systems exist but are currently the exception, rather than the rule. While we see the military and corporate America using multiple measures, 360 evaluations and other tools that tie standards to research and progress, the practice is still not commonly utilized in our public schools. In Assessing the Effectiveness of School Leaders: New Directions and New Processes, the Wallace Foundation rightly states:

“Standards are meaningful only when brought to life, however, and in the area of leadership assessment in public education there has been a paucity of instruments and processes that effectively apply the new standards. Some states—notably Kentucky, Iowa and Delaware—have begun using the ISLLC standards as the basis for assessing leaders, improving their performance, and redesigning the training programs that prepare them for their jobs.”

As states are compelled to establish effectiveness of teachers and principals through new evaluation systems, and as districts are moving rapidly to design and implement systems based on new parameters and measures, we must avoid turning to one-time student testing metrics to determine principal and teacher effectiveness.

The voice of principals is essential to the development, design and implementation of principal evaluation systems. Principals must be afforded opportunities to provide ongoing feedback as systems are developed and implemented.

States and local educational agencies (LEAs) must develop fair, objective and comprehensive evaluation systems, based on the “core competencies of effective school leadership.” We must also prioritize principal evaluation systems that rely on highly trained mentors, coaches or veteran principals to give districts the capacity to evaluate principals—especially those principals who have a demonstrated track record of successful school reform and improvement efforts.

As stated in the 2012 publication, Rethinking Principal Evaluation: A New Paradigm Informed by Research and Practice, NAESP believes that performance evaluations, if meaningful and accurate, serve as a tool for professional growth and spark professional reflection and learning. State and local principal evaluation system design should focus on building the capacity of principals. And the outcomes of any evaluation must connect to a trajectory of growth and professional development opportunities.
Develop Accountability Systems That Include Growth Models and Multiple Measures

Principals know firsthand that states simply need more time and resources to develop and run systems necessary to effectively measure student growth. It is also clear that states must do a better job measuring the multiple ways in which educators impact student learning and/or the evidence of improved cognitive performance. At the school building level, differentiated accountability and sound teacher and principal evaluation systems cannot function properly without sufficient, accurate and timely data. Systems must also be able to support a variety of quantifiable measures of student performance that are not standardized test scores, since those scores are nothing more than a snapshot of a student’s abilities at one specific moment in time.

As principals are left with the responsibility for implementing seismic shifts in school-based practices to achieve higher levels of student learning aligned to college- and career-ready standards, these school leaders, in general, are receiving little to no reciprocal support from states and districts to improve their own practice to implement reforms. We must provide sufficient time for systems to be built and for educators to implement them.

Collaboratively, we can help improve student learning and build the capacity of principals if we:

- Insist that assessment data be used to inform instruction in fair, flexible and authentic ways as it reflects students’ progress toward academic proficiency.
- Help give principals the professional development and time to understand how schools must shift instruction and practice to meet new goals.
- Measure student achievement in multiple ways to accurately capture students’ proficiency in core academic content areas but also in their emotional and social development; language fluency and comprehension; and creativity, adaptability, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Assessment using a single metric produces a one-dimensional view of the child, the teacher, the principal and the school.
- Build a complete picture of improved student outcomes, not an up or down, pass-fail, standardized test score designed at the federal level and that has no regard for the multitude of ways students progress.
- Include the expertise of principals working every day in schools in the development of accountability mechanisms.

This evolving role of the principal is further supported by the research conducted by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington’s look at principal/teacher relationships in 15 districts, as chronicled in Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools and by the Wallace Foundation’s 2011 report, Research Findings to Support Effective Policymaking: Evidence and Action Steps for State, District and Local Policymakers.
Currently, to meet the standard of effectiveness, principals and assistant principals must demonstrate success in being a classroom teacher and in leading adults, have an advanced degree and express a passion for and commitment to shared leadership. Aspiring principals who have not had significant experience serving as an assistant principal must receive training during a year-long pre-service residency that includes: coaching from an effective principal; hands-on instructional leadership experience; supporting a curriculum that focuses on effective instructional practices; recruiting and supporting effective staff and leadership teams; developing a school vision and continuous improvement plan; addressing the needs of specific student populations; managing school organizations; and engaging community members and parents.

Just as we are holding our principals to higher standards, so too must we expect more from preparation programs. “Principal training programs, whether run by universities, nonprofits or districts, [should] recruit and select only the people with the potential and desire to become effective principals in the districts the programs feed into,” The School Principal as Leader found. “The programs [should] provide the future leaders with high-quality training and internships that reflect the realities education leaders face in the field.” Such findings are further supported by Policy Studies Associates in its 2013 Six Districts Begin the Principal Pipeline Initiative study.

NAESP recognizes that other pathways to certification exist but believes that any alternative path to principal certification must include a school-based residency/internship under the guidance of an effective mentor principal and in-depth study of effective school leadership.
Insist on Standards-Based Certification, Induction and Mentoring

Districts and preparation programs, including higher education partners, provide opportunities for additional internships, peer coaching, job shadowing, networking and mentorships for aspiring principals.

All principals, especially early-career principals facing their most challenging years in the profession, must be provided access to **standards-based mentoring programs**. A wide array of research shows that this peer-to-peer interaction improves a broad range of leadership characteristics, including:

- Nurturing teacher and staff development to strengthen classroom instruction;
- Building and sustaining a culture of learning among adults and children;
- Strengthening communications and relationships with parents, caregivers and community stakeholders;
- Facilitating the sharing of knowledge, insight and best practices; and
- Building relationships and communicating effectively with state and district officials.

As the Wallace Foundation articulated in *The School Principal as Leader*, “districts [need] to regularly evaluate principals, assessing the behaviors that research tells us are most closely tied to improving teaching and student achievement. Districts then [should] provide professional development, including mentoring, that responds to what the evaluations find for each individual.” We place such an emphasis on certification, induction and mentoring of our classroom teachers; we should expect no less for our school leaders.
Invest in Identifying and Retaining Effective Principals

We must reinforce our support for principals as a key factor in school improvement plans. Research demonstrates the particular value of a highly effective principal in schools with students of low income, who are minority or English-language learners, and who are low-achieving. As part of school improvement and school turnaround efforts, we must focus on ensuring effective principals in such schools. Some specific recommendations for preparing, training, supporting and retaining effective principals in these schools include:

- Increase investments in high-quality professional development for all educators, including school leaders.
- Focus on school improvement that builds incentives for principals to influence the school’s conditions, including improving teacher quality, providing job-embedded professional development, mentoring, coaching and time for collaboration.
- Offer stipends for accomplished principals and those who take on master or mentor principal roles in high-need schools.

It is particularly important that we provide meaningful mentoring of school principals, especially for novice principals in the first three years of service. The research is clear that mentoring programs are the most effective method of delivering job-embedded, ongoing and sustained professional development for principals.

As part of a shared commitment to identify and retain effective principals, we must focus on ways to develop and implement standards-based mentor training programs and curriculum for principals to be able to: build data-driven school improvement plans; use student assessment data for making instructional decisions; strengthen relationships within the learning community; design collaborative professional development plans; and impact staff recruitment, hiring and dismissal.

The Making of the Principal: Five Lessons in Leadership Training notes,

“Districts should do more to exercise their power to raise the quality of principal training, so that graduates meet their needs. States could make better use of their power to influence the quality of leadership training through standard-setting, program accreditation, principal certification and financial support for highly qualified candidates. [And] especially in their first years on the job, principals need high-quality mentoring and professional development tailored to individual and district needs.”

These intents are further enhanced by the Council of Great City Schools in its Rethinking Leadership: The Changing Role of Principal Supervisors, which distills key lessons learned in several large school districts across the nation.
Dedicate Ongoing Professional Development That Strengthens Core Competencies

Current social, economic and political realities require principals to accomplish ever-greater academic goals with ever-shrinking resources, prepare young people with higher order thinking skills befitting a global society, analyze and use increasingly complex data, and incorporate rapidly changing technology in instruction and learning. To meet these demands—and many others—principals require high-quality, forward-looking professional development.

To achieve this, we should examine the best ways to:

- Require state and district professional development programs to build capacity of principals, aligned to core competencies of effective school leadership.
- Provide a range of learning opportunities for principals that extend and build upon their formal academic preparation.
- Enable principals to master emerging school improvement strategies and support their knowledge of rapidly changing skills and technologies, including professionally delivered events outside of their schools and site-specific, job-embedded learning and online training.

In its *The Three Essentials: Improving Schools Requires District Vision, District and State Support, and Principal Leadership*, the Southern Regional Education Board identified a need to “invest in high-quality professional development for the district staff, school principals and teachers. Effective districts invest in the learning not only of students but also of teachers, principals, district staff, superintendents and school board members.”

To put it more succinctly, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, a research review from the Universities of Minnesota and Toronto, highlights, “Districts that believe that the quality of student learning is highly dependent on the quality of instruction organize themselves to support instructionally-focused professional learning.”

We must not lose sight of the importance of meaningful professional development for all educators, especially principals. More than a decade of Wallace Foundation research on this topic is brought forward, notably the analysis contained in *The Effective Principal* (Mendels 2012).
Strengthen Elementary Principals’ Knowledge of Early Childhood Education

High-quality early childhood education is not just an ideal—it’s an essential investment. Missed opportunities at ages two, three and four can put children behind when they start school and leave barriers to achievement that can last through high school. Beyond school, research has tied strong early learning to better-educated and more employable individuals, less remediation throughout the education system, and lower criminal justice costs, benefiting all of society. Disadvantaged children stand to gain the most from early childhood education because we know early intervention helps close achievement gaps. In its groundbreaking report, *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities*, NAESP outlines a clear blueprint for how principals can provide the necessary leadership to ensure our youngest learners, from prekindergarten through third grade, receive every opportunity to learn and succeed.

As noted in *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*, the application of retention policies when third graders fail to achieve a minimum score on the state performance exam often has “negative effects on learning as well as attitudes toward school and learning” for elementary school students. Similarly, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that a high-quality early childhood education program is a central component to ensuring students perform at grade level upon entry to the fourth grade, demonstrating the need for a stronger “P-3” continuum.

NAESP strongly supports efforts to strengthen the connections between early childhood programs, school districts and elementary schools. Principals should work with the local early childhood community to understand where the most vulnerable children are being served and foster collaboration to ensure that every child is ready to enter school.

Greater professional development opportunities are needed for elementary school principals in early childhood education and development, including specific efforts to help them: acquire leadership competencies in early childhood education and development in order to support increased school readiness for students; gain a knowledge base and capacity to provide appropriate early childhood settings in the school building in grades pre-K through 3; and work collaboratively with early childhood education providers, services providers and families in creating a continuum of high quality learning for children in the community coming into school settings and through the early elementary years.


The Effective Principal, Pamela Mendels, Learning Forward, 2012.


NAESP’s Characteristics of Effective Principals

NAESP has created two seminal publications that define professional standards for principals. These two volumes—Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do and Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do constitute a research-based body of knowledge that defines characteristics of effective principals, summarized below:

Effective Principals, K-Grade 8
Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do

- Place a high value on student and adult learning
- Set high expectations for the academic, social, emotional and physical needs of all students
- Demand content and instruction that ensure student achievement of standards
- Create a culture of continuous learning tied to student learning
- Manage data to inform decisions and measure performance
- Actively engage the community in shared responsibility

Effective Principals PreK-Grade 6
Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do

- Place a high value on high-quality early childhood programs, principles and practices
- Work with families and the community to support early learning opportunities
- Provide appropriate learning environments for young children
- Ensure high-quality curriculum and instructional practices that foster learning and development
- Use multiple assessments to strengthen student learning
- Support high-quality universal early childhood education programs

About the National Association of Elementary School Principals

Established in 1921, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) represents the nation’s elementary and middle school principals in the United States, Canada and overseas. NAESP believes that principals are primary catalysts for creating lasting foundations for learning, and leads in the advocacy and support for elementary and middle-level principals and other education leaders in their commitment to all children. In addition to advocating for sound policies in pre-K-3 alignment, principal preparation and evaluation, and building the capacity of new principals, the Association provides a variety of online and on-site professional development programs.

NAESP Vision

NAESP is committed to meeting the demands of today and ensuring excellence in the future for principals and children. Our vision focuses on the core work of principals and of NAESP as:

- Leading education on behalf of children;
- Learning for continuous professional development; and
- Fostering community in and around schools, across the country and around the world.
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