The role of the principal has expanded dramatically in recent decades. Gone are the days when a principal’s managerial responsibilities were mostly administrative and included the oversight of transportation, discipline, and budgetary issues. Today, these aspects of the job are just a sliver of a principal’s day-to-day responsibilities.

To effectively lead a school, today’s principal must also take on the role of instructional leader to create learning conditions that support teaching and learning. Principals must be in classrooms, observe instruction, and connect teachers with professional learning opportunities to be significant multipliers of effective teaching and directly impact student achievement.

With such an important role in the educational ecosystem, principals can have an enormous influence on policy debates and advance the initiatives that matter most to students. Principals can educate policymakers to better understand the on-the-ground realities in schools and what’s needed for students to succeed.

When principals sit on the sidelines, though, they allow others who might push policies harmful to schools and students to fill the void. Thus, it’s incumbent upon leaders to inform policymakers about the role of the principal, help them understand the complexities of schools, and ensure they support the policies and programs that lead to successful schools.

Opportunities for advocacy exist at the local, state, and federal levels, including local school boards, state legislatures, state boards of education, and the U.S. Congress. Depending on their interests, expertise, desired policy goals, and contexts, principals might engage with different policymakers on different issues. Some of the opportunities outlined here aim to advance the principal’s profession, while others aim to more immediately and directly support schools and students.
5 Advocacy Opportunities

No. 1: Principal Pipelines
One policy that can help principals advance the field is to boost investment in the “principal pipeline”—that set of systems that influence and nurture aspiring principals, including evidence-based leadership standards, preparation, licensure, hiring and placement, evaluation and support, and school and district working conditions.

As advocates, principals can push for principal pipelines at the local, state, and federal levels, and they can focus on strengthening different components of the pipeline. For example, principals might encourage their state to raise entrance prerequisites for preparation programs, institute state board of education rules and regulations that elevate licensure requirements, or push for strengthened partnerships between preparation programs and local school districts.

Key Takeaway: By calling on their states to adopt high-quality leadership standards, principals can signal to policymakers that the state plays a critical role in ensuring that educator preparation programs provide a relevant, high-quality curriculum that best prepares school leaders to lead schools effectively.

No. 2: Strengthened Principal Standards
Rigorous program coursework in principal training programs must be relevant to the skills, knowledge, and dispositions principals need to meet the day-to-day challenges of leading a school. Coursework should expose candidates to the latest evidence-based leadership practices and be taught by expert practitioners who have a track record of success in leading schools and boosting student outcomes.

One policy lever that can help push principal preparation programs to use such high-quality, relevant coursework is to ensure that the state has adopted leadership standards. A handful of states have adopted the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders—10 leadership standards that focus on the holistic skills and knowledge that principals need to be successful. Adoption of such standards provides guideposts of what principal candidates need to know and be able to do in order to be job-ready on day one.

Leadership standards should be student-centered and help educational leaders move the needle on student learning and achieve more equitable outcomes. Principal voice matters greatly in this effort, because principals bring a credibility to the idea that strong preservice training is essential to future success in the principalship. While the aim is to get preservice preparation programs to adopt high-quality standards, leader standards should anchor leadership work at the district level as well, including principal pipelines and professional development programs.

Key Takeaway: When principals advocate for boosting principal pipelines, it sends a clear message to policymakers that the profession wants resources dedicated to systems that train, support, and place effective school leaders at the helm of every K–12 school.

No. 3: Principal Residencies
Job-embedded principal training that simulates the school experience offers principal candidates the opportunity to connect theory to practice. Though it positions principals to be profession-ready quickly, clinical-based practice opportunities for principal candidates are not the norm.

Residencies allow candidates to engage in authentic learning opportunities, immersing them in day-to-day experiences that deepen their knowledge of the core competencies they will need to lead a school; in essence, it’s “learning by doing.” A principal preparation program might pair a principal candidate with a mentor principal and provide opportunities to engage in authentic principal-level leadership functions. Activities might include conducting classroom observations and instructional walk-throughs with the mentor, leading or participating in instructionally focused committee meetings, or developing responses to challenging communication issues such as parent emails or phone calls. This front-row seat to the day-to-day challenges of the job expands principal candidates’ capacity to solve problems, accelerates learning of instructional leadership skills, and exposes them to the process of creating and executing a schoolwide vision. By accessing job-embedded practice opportunities before they take the reins, principal candidates receive experiential learning that sets them up for success in the role.

Key Takeaway: Principals are positioned to inform policymakers that principal preparation programs need to be reimagined, with more emphasis needed on clinical-based practice. Principals can press elected officials to invest in principal residency programs and stress that clinically oriented practice better “battle-tests”
principals before they take on the responsibility of leading a school. When principals receive such training, they’re more likely to be successful in the position and less likely to leave the profession, saving school districts money in the long term.

**No. 4: Principal Professional Development**

Professional development for principals is critical for school leaders to stay abreast of the latest teaching practices effective in improving student outcomes. Principals need ongoing learning and coaching to deepen the knowledge, skills, and practices necessary to meet students’ learning needs. To ensure that funding is available for PD, federal policymakers need to hear from principals about why it is so key to their success.

Title II-A Supporting Effective Instruction

State Grants provide $2.05 billion annually in federal funding to states and school districts for the professional development and support of teachers and principals. Title II-A also includes an optional 3 percent set-aside that enables states to allot a portion of their Title II funds to statewide activities focused on boosting school leadership; 24 states use it to expand coaching and mentoring opportunities for early-career principals, support aspiring principals, and bring high-quality preparation to rural communities.

Title II-A has become a target for cuts under the Trump administration; in the president’s previous three budget requests, Title II-A was proposed for elimination. Now more than ever, it’s critical for principals to fight these cuts and push for continued investment supporting ongoing learning.

**Key Takeaway:**Title II-A, the only dedicated federal funding stream that goes toward principal PD, is under attack. Principals can use their voice to fight these cuts and push for continued investment supporting ongoing learning.

**No. 5: Student Mental Health**

Improving access to in-school mental health services for students is another policy topic that’s ripe for principals’ input. Policymakers need to hear from principals about which mental health programs work in school; discussions should also focus on how these programs should be designed, funded, and implemented as a comprehensive schoolwide approach that facilitates interdisciplinary collaboration and builds on a multiliteracy system of supports.

Principals can also push policymakers to allow blended, flexible funding streams in education and mental health services, and to improve staffing ratios of school psychologists and counselors to allow for the delivery of a full range of services. Two pieces of legislation NAESP has endorsed at the federal level—the Mental Health Services for Students Act (S. 1122/H.R. 1109) and the Elementary and Secondary School Counseling Act (S. 2499/H.R. 4381)—would help provide additional resources to schools and districts to help expand in-school services. NAESP members should reach out to their members of Congress and urge them to cosponsor these critical pieces of legislation.

**Key Takeaway:**Principals have a unique lens on what works in in-school mental health services, how such systems should be designed, and what funding is needed. Principals can use their voice to push policymakers to help ensure that all students who need mental health services can easily access these supports.

The principal’s voice is powerful in education policy debates. When policymakers hear from principals on issues that directly impact schools and students, they listen. Elected officials know that principals have a credibility that other actors in the educational ecosystem don’t possess.

Advocacy is about pushing for a voice at the table when decisions about your cause are being made. If you don’t elevate your voice, somebody else who might have opposing policy goals could be pushing lawmakers to support policies that undercut your school and its students. Every NAESP member can ensure that policymakers hear from the principal profession. Will you use your voice to advocate on behalf of your students?

Danny Carlson is NAESP’s associate executive director of policy and advocacy.

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Be sure to visit NAESP’s Advocacy Action Center to find out how to get involved with NAESP’s federal advocacy efforts. And sign up for NAESP’s advocacy text alerts to stay on top of opportunities to be heard. p2a.co/YPmZD2T.