Only a Principal...

Mark Twain said that everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it. I know exactly what he meant. These days, there seems to be a lot of grumbling about the need to improve schools, but there are very few substantive proposals that will actually result in sustainable improvement.

In the national discussion to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (still officially called No Child Left Behind), policymakers and educators alike have been distracted by the “shiny objects” of improvement—narrow definitions, so-called reform models, a focus on the lowest performing schools—instead of the rock-solid strategies that can make a real difference in strengthening schools.

Let’s be clear. All of us—educators, legislators, parents, association executives—share the same goal: school improvement, which is the focus of this issue of Principal magazine.

But let’s also be clear about this: A great teacher can create and sustain a great classroom, but only a principal can create and sustain an excellent school.

Only a principal can establish, lead, and bolster a comprehensive teaching and learning culture—from the classroom to the playground to the library.

Only a principal can support and nurture an entire teaching staff.

Only a principal can unite teachers within a grade level so excellent teachers can mentor less-experienced colleagues.

Only a principal can create cross-grade teams so children benefit from aligned, integrated curriculum at critical junctures of learning—the transition from pre-K to the primary grades, for example.

Only a principal can lead non-instructional staff to support student achievement.

Only a principal can rally parents and caregivers to be actively and positively engaged in a child’s education.

Only a principal can serve as the primary catalyst for creating a lasting foundation for learning, driving school and student performance, and shaping the long-term impact of school improvement efforts.

If we want to strengthen schools, we must invest in strengthening principals. Just as the shin bone is connected to the knee bone, principals are connected to districts—systems that work best when its parts—schools—work best.

Strengthening principals is a key, vital step in taking a systems approach to school improvement. But it won’t be easy.

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The printed copy of No Child Left Behind weighs about 5 pounds. I’m betting that when the shouts and whispers of the ESEA debate finally end, we’ll still have a 5-pound law. And in all of the arcane language, policy twists and turns, distractions of untested theories, and uncertainties of a new Congress, NAESP is aggressively advancing two straightforward, transformational priorities to strengthen principals and improve schools.

Professional development. We are working to broaden ESEA’s Title II, the section of the law that authorizes professional development for educators. As it currently stands, Title II is skewed toward teachers; only about 3 percent of the authorized grants are allocated to principals.

NAESP is calling on Congress to substantially increase this support so all principals have access to the professional development they require. Our specific calls include greater support for novice principals to ensure they gain the skills and wisdom they need to thrive in the profession and for principals engaged in early childhood education to strengthen their capacity to align pre-K programs with primary grades.

Fair and reasonable evaluation. We are working to ensure that principal evaluation is fair, objective, and predominately based on multiple measures, not just standardized test scores. Principals must be evaluated according to their capacity to improve student learning based on reasonable growth and development. Further, NAESP advocates that principal evaluation is most effective when carried out at the local level and adapted to each school setting. NAESP is taking the lead in this by coordinating a principal-led initiative to provide baseline evaluation guidelines for states and districts.

That’s it: two direct, powerful strategies for systemically improving schools. The path forward, however, is not entirely clear. Regardless of the length and duration of this journey, NAESP is your champion on Capitol Hill, in the Department of Education, and with other education associations in Washington, D.C. We are also proud of our partnerships with our state affiliates who are such effective advocates for principals in statehouses. Working together, we can ensure that the voice of principals is heard and heeded. Lend your voice to these critical efforts by contacting your federal elected representatives online at NAESP’s Legislative Action Center (www.naesp.org/advocacy).