As the nation progresses through the first quarter of the 21st century, the education community continues to strive to ensure the necessary conditions for all students to thrive. To that end, the role of principal leadership in guiding teaching and learning has gained greater recognition in the past decade.

“Leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning,” wrote Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson in their now-seminal research linking principal leadership to student success. But this thinking was not always the case. In 2002, when the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act was signed into law, it was done so with 119 mentions of “principals” as school leaders.

How Does Your Experience Compare?

NAESP’s 10-year study of the principalship reveals student mental health is a top concern for the nation’s K–8 principals

By L. Earl Franks, Ed.D., CAE
Fast-forward to the 2015 passage of the reauthorized version of the law: The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) mentions principal leadership no fewer than 210 times. Increased visibility and greater recognition for the critical role of school leaders—and in particular, principals—in overall school success requires that now, more than ever before, we study, understand, and support principals in their leadership of learning communities.

Since the 1928 publication of its first 10-year research study, “The K–8 Principal,” the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) has been doing just that—collecting data on the climate, challenges, and conditions that mark the principalship. “The Pre-K–8 School Leader in 2018: A 10-Year Study” is the ninth in this series, and it imparts new information about the current education climate; the challenges veteran, early-career, and assistant principals face; the students they serve; and the conditions under which they work.

NAESP leadership and staff rely on the data from each successive survey to guide in strengthening advocacy and policy efforts, delivering communication and related services, and providing professional learning opportunities to address the most pressing needs of our members. It also can assist us in identifying trends and making predictions about the future.

NAESP partnered with the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) to develop this resource. “The quality of education a student experiences in elementary school greatly impacts their education and life trajectory, and research has demonstrated that educational leaders strongly shape the conditions for high-quality teaching and learning,” says UCEA Executive Director Michelle Young. “The NAESP 10-year study provides a portrait of these critical educational professionals, their concerns, their triumphs, and key considerations for educational stakeholders. It not only provides vivid insight into the work of contemporary elementary school leaders, but it also identifies multiple avenues for future research.”

The K–8 Principal’s Perspective

The top-ranked concern among 2018’s responding principals was to address the increase in students with emotional problems. In fact, respondents identified a number of student-related issues as being of “moderate,” “high,” and “extreme” concern. Among those issues identified were the management of student behavior; student mental health issues; absenteeism; lack of effective adult supervision at home; and student poverty. In contrast, none of these student-related issues was identified as a major concern in 2008. Clearly, the concerns regarding student populations have shifted over the past decade.

Conditions of employment continue to be a source of additional pressure for school leaders participating in the study. The average number of reported hours per workweek has increased steadily over the past 90 years, from 44 hours in 1928, to 56 hours in 2008, to 61 hours in 2018. Additionally, the average number of school-related work hours per week outside of the school building was almost eight hours for 2018 respondents—an increase of an hour per week over the past decade.

“Recent research has shown that 20 percent of principals leave their positions each year, with almost 30 percent of principals in high-poverty schools leaving each year. In fact, the average school tenure of a principal is less than five years,” says Ed Fuller, UCEA’s associate director of policy and one of the report’s authors. “This high rate of churn has negative effects on both teachers and students, [and] costs districts a substantial amount of money. Some emerging research suggests that the working conditions of principals substantially affect their decisions to stay in a school. Moreover, working conditions appear to also affect their effectiveness on the job. Thus, understanding how to better support principals in the important work they do is critical to improving schools.”

Other major 2018 takeaways from the 10-year study have implications for these areas:

**Equity:** The “average” principal among those surveyed was 50 years old, female, and white.
The median school enrollment increased from 450 in 2008 to 505 in 2018. Further, 62 percent of principals indicated that the number of assistant principals assigned to their building was not enough to ensure effective school leadership that meets the needs of all students.

**Pipeline:** Most principals can and will retire in approximately eight years if they remain in their present system, which, according to the study, they intend to do. Average principal tenure is 11 years, with seven years spent at their current school. No dramatic decrease was represented in the percentage of principals who have served for 20 or more years.

Less than 5 percent of the administrators surveyed in the study reported entering the principalship through an alternative route, receiving their first principalship at 40 years of age, having 10 years’ experience as elementary school teacher prior to becoming principal, or having a total of 22 years of experience in education.

**Preparation and Support:** Whereas more than half of respondents indicated they had participated in online development programs, respondents also indicated that practical experience as an administrator and as a teacher was the most valuable influence on their success. Principals identified improving student performance as the key area of need for professional development.

**Authority:** Over the last three decades, respondents have noted having substantially less influence over district decisions concerning elementary schools and elementary education. Responses to the 2018 NAESP 10-year study identify multiple areas of professional development need, including improving student performance, improving staff performance, understanding and applying technology, managing time, using social media effectively, and planning school improvement.

As with prior NAESP 10-year studies, respondents conveyed the message that they find the work of leading schools to be gratifying. When asked if they would do it again, the majority agreed that they would, and that they also would recommend the principalship as a career to others. This is the best news our survey can report. The leadership and staff of NAESP are proud to serve these dedicated school leaders and remain committed to our mission of supporting their efforts on behalf of children.

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**Principal Trends**

*From the Pre-K–8 School Leader in 2018: A 10-Year Study*

**Supportive culture**

62% of principals indicated that the number of assistant principals assigned to their building is not enough to meet the needs of all students.

Parent support remains high, but it is down from 2008. In 2018, 60 percent of respondents described parents as highly supportive; 75 percent reported the same in 2008.

**Relationships with stakeholders**

80% of principals indicated that they have “excellent” or “good” relationships with all stakeholders.

Students benefit from the best relationships, with 81 percent of principals rating them “excellent”; school board relationships rated only 32 percent “excellent” and 50 percent “good,” with 18 percent “fair” or “poor.”

**Increase in involvement**

42% noted more involvement with student mental health issues.

32% noted more involvement in student social and emotional well-being.

36% noted more involvement with personnel evaluations and use of assessment data in instructional planning.

**Top areas of professional learning need**

- Improving student performance 18%
- Improving staff performance 16%
- Understanding and applying technology 13%
- Time management 12%
- Using social media effectively 12%
- School improvement planning 12%

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