Passion Projects

Educators discuss the goals for their schools and the innovations they use to help meet them

By Krysia Gabenski
No principal is an island—even though it might feel like it sometimes. With this in mind, NAESP created the NAESP Center for Innovative Leadership (CIL) to bring together principals from across the country to work through challenges and share innovative strategies. Our goal? To make principals feel less alone as they work to support students and schools across the nation.

With the creation of the NAESP CIL came an innovative idea—video podcasts featuring principals and assistant principals—that fellows Andy Jacks and Hamish Brewer have taken and run with. The first of its kind, the podcast series focuses on
the challenges, successes, and innovations of everyday principals.

Jacks and Brewer have talked with a principal whose school population is 95 percent Hispanic. One who has used a chicken coop to teach lessons to his students and engage the community. Another who starts the day off with a dance party to get kids moving and ready to learn. And a principal whose storm-chasing past fuels his passion to keep his students safe from potential tornados.

Though their backgrounds are different, these principals have one thing in common: Their passions in life carry over into how they lead their schools—and in all cases, those passions have changed the schools for the better. Here are some of their biggest ideas:

**Leverage Corporate Sponsorships and Post Pictures of Your School**

Jessica Gomez, principal, Alice Birney Elementary School, California (@mrsjessgomez)

- Before Gomez took the helm at Alice Birney Elementary, the school had established an outdoor butterfly garden in memory of a staff member who passed away. Over the years, use of the garden and its upkeep fell off. That’s where the city mayor and Walmart came in; together, the managers of a new distribution center revitalized the butterfly garden as a team-building project.
- Gomez did something that most people don’t do anymore—she had black-and-white prints made from the photos of her students and staff that “lived” on her phone and social media pages. After framing the prints, she displayed them in the lobby trophy case, which turned out to be something that students and families alike appreciate.

**Recognize Accomplishments and Encourage Everyday Respect**

Curtis Slater, former principal, Wyoming Elementary School, Minnesota (@Slater_Curtis_)

- Teachers recognize classes for working together to accomplish goals. One of the top badges to earn is the Golden Vacuum Cleaner, which is exactly what it sounds like—an old vacuum cleaner spray-painted gold. The custodian selects the class with the cleanest room, and that classroom hosts the vacuum cleaner until the next class earns it.

**Infuse the Arts Throughout the School and Offer Instant Feedback**

Craig Martin, former principal, Michael J. Perkins Elementary School, Massachusetts (@CraigCMartin12)

- From the second anyone walks into the school, they know—actually, they hear—that the arts are incorporated into as many aspects of education as possible at Michael J. Perkins Elementary School. Music plays in the lobby of the school to welcome children. Students hear songs from artists such as New Edition and Barbra Streisand and from musicals such as *The Greatest Showman*.
- Martin and his teachers place high value in “aggressive monitoring.” Put simply, teachers give every student in a classroom immediate feedback they can use to improve their work. This helped Perkins beat the average in English language arts and math, and reverse the achievement gap for Hispanic students and English-language learners.

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Create Unique Learning Spaces and Retain Quality Teachers
Bivins Miller, principal, McAllister Elementary School, Georgia (@BivinsMiller)

- Using grant funding, the school built a chicken coop. Starting in the fall, McAllister students will learn how to tend to the chickens, harvest the eggs, and use the chicken manure to fertilize garden plots behind the coop. The students will sell eggs to members of the community, with the funds going back into supporting the project.
- To retain teachers, Miller runs a yearlong mentorship program. Veteran teachers and administrators partner with newly hired teachers to make sure they know they have someone to lean on as they adjust to a new school. Miller stays connected to teachers after they’re hired, too, especially if it’s going to be months before they are in the school teaching. He keeps in contact with them and even sends them swag bags with goodies such as hats and T-shirts from the school so they feel as if they’re part of the family right off the bat.

Use Grant Funding to Extend Learning Beyond the School Walls
Diane MacKinnon, principal, Momauguin Elementary School, Connecticut (@diane_mackinnon)

- The school provided every student—compliments of the PTA, through fundraising—a Team Momauguin T-shirt. Students from kindergarten through fifth grade joined one of five teams of students from each grade level. Together, students learn about teamwork through reading competitions, attendance competitions, and dance performances. Something for each student to look forward to? As a fifth grader, you get to run a school assembly from start to finish.
- With help from a team of teachers, MacKinnon’s school won a Schoolyard Habitat Grant funded by Audubon Connecticut and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Students use the natural space to problem-solve, investigate, and explore, and the school invites community members to help take care of the space so future Momauguin students can enjoy it, too.

Improve an F Rating in a High-Trauma School Through Literacy
Cindy Emerson, principal, Vero Beach Elementary School, Florida (@Emersizzle)

- The “Book Snap of the Day” encourages excitement around literacy. In 30 seconds, students give a Snapchat overview of a book they’re reading—using a filter such as puppy ears, of course. (What fun is Snapchat if you don’t give yourself dog ears?!) If students could read, they would, says Emerson. Vero Beach students didn’t have easy access to books, however, so she made it her goal to fix that. Using grant money, she held a Scholastic book fair that let every student choose 11 books to keep. New staff took advantage of a second Scholastic book fair at which teachers were each allowed to take $400 in books to beef up their classroom libraries. To do this at your school, reach out to the community and companies that want to help but don’t know how, Emerson says, and go to Scholastic warehouse book sales.

Bring the Outside Inside and Focus on Health and Wellness
Steven Smith, principal, Eden Hall Upper Elementary School, Pennsylvania (@EdenHallU)

- To support kids’ wellness, the school established an indoor walking path students can use during cold weather, when they
aren’t able to get outside to play and move around. Along the route, students see designated exercise areas, where they can opt to do wall pushups or jumping jacks. The school’s Fitness Lab features 20 stationary bikes—purchased by the PTO—that students can hop on to meet their health and wellness goals.

The school displays five biomes—desert, grassland, forest, aquatic, and tundra—including waterfalls in its hallways and representations of the trees that were cut down to build the school. It’s a reminder that “we’re keepers of the Earth,” says Smith, and each tree is labeled with a key characteristic or goal, such as “responsibility,” that students can aim to achieve. Children don’t climb the trees or play in the water, he adds, because the staff has worked hard to help students feel ownership in the school.

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Questions for Reflection

Every good leader wants to make a positive impact on his or her school. Here are several questions to ask yourself and your teams as you determine which systems might benefit from an innovative new strategy—and how best to put it in place:

- Have you previously attempted to establish a new strategy that didn’t work out as expected? Why do you think the initiative failed?
- What areas of school operations (i.e., curriculum, training/professional development, staffing, school culture, etc.) do you wish to see change under your tenure, and why?
- How will you present and promote the proposed change(s) to your school’s staff, parents, district, and community?
- How can you be sure that any planned change respects and advances the individual learning needs of all students in your school?
- What challenges might you face in attempting to innovate (staff/parent buy-in, funding, etc.), and how do you plan to overcome them?
- How do you plan to measure the progress and relative success of any new initiative or strategy you put in place?

Keep Students Physically and Emotionally Safe
Scott Hein, principal, Lakeview Elementary School, Oklahoma (@ScottJHein)

- The school features a program called “A Beautiful Day” that celebrates students’ birthdays. Some students don’t get birthday parties or have families who bring in treats for their child to share with classmates. A committee invites community volunteers such as district administrators and superintendents to come into the school, put on “A Beautiful Day” T-shirts, and pass out pizza and cupcakes in honor of kids celebrating their birthdays.
- Focusing on mitigating the emotional impact of a disaster such as a tornado, the school has safe rooms that can hold hundreds of students. If there’s a close call with a tornado, Hein says, “We don’t just say, ‘OK, we’ve got the all-clear. Go home.’” Faculty and staff follow up with students afterward. Some students have been in schools that have been hit by tornados before and need extra care because it’s a trauma point for them.

Bring the Curriculum to Life for Early Childhood Learners
Kim Taylor, principal, Dr. Thomas J. Curran Early Childhood Center, Massachusetts (@PrincipalKim)

- Compliments of the school PTO, the gym at Curran features backdrops like those you’d see in a play, with inviting scenes such as a living room, where Taylor and her faculty can gather students for a read-aloud. It’s called “Family Fireside Stories,” and the idea came about during holiday celebrations. To keep students’ attention, the story is projected onto a blank wall so they can see what they’re listening to. Complete with a comfortable chair and a floor lamp, it’s a place where students and their families can gather.
- A kindergarten unit on superpowers offers the opportunity to get creative in bringing the curriculum to life. To wrap up a reading superpowers workshop, Taylor and a group of teachers and support staff dressed up and put on an assembly. Who doesn’t want to wear a cape at school?!