



June 23, 2014

The Honorable Tom Harkin
Chairman
Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Harkin,

On behalf of the nation's prekindergarten, elementary, middle, and high school level principals, assistant principals, and other school leaders, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) thank you for your leadership in moving forward with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) by releasing a discussion draft.

NAESP and NASSP are pleased with many of the provisions contained in the draft related to the recruitment and preparation of the nation's principals. The proposal makes several positive changes to the programs that are critically important to improving our nation's education system and supporting the essential role of principals as they provide instructional leadership in schools.

Principals as School Leaders

Federal policies must provide support for principals and their role in fostering high-quality instruction and learning. The emphasis on school-level outcomes and student achievement places the school leader at the center of all school reform efforts. Today's principals and assistant principals are expected to be visionary leaders, instructional experts, building managers, assessment specialists, disciplinarians, community builders, and more. The impact of principals is second only to that of effective teachers in classrooms. NAESP and NASSP support the language in the bill to define the term "school leader" as principals and assistant principals within the school building who are responsible for the daily instructional leadership and managerial operations of the school, creates the optimum conditions for student learning, or is an early childhood program leader or director.

Principal Preparation

NAESP and NASSP support the authorization of a competitive grant program to recruit, support, and prepare principals and assistant principals to improve student academic achievement in high-need schools. We support a proposal that would create one-year residencies to train aspiring principals and would provide ongoing mentoring, support, and professional development for at least two years after the aspiring principals complete the residency and commence work as school leaders.

NAESP and NASSP support programs that require institutions of higher education and alternative principal preparation entities to select high-quality candidates to enter their programs and ensure that graduates are committed to serving as school leaders.

We also support proposals that require principal candidates to have demonstrated success as a classroom teacher. Individuals with strong instructional backgrounds are better able to relate to and lead teachers, and identify and model effective classroom practices. Candidates must also demonstrate abilities related to effective school leadership competencies, and show prior success in leading adults, have an advanced degree, and demonstrate a passion and commitment to leadership. Aspiring principals should receive training during a year-long pre-service residency that includes coaching from an effective principal, hands-on instructional leadership experience, and 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.

The aspiring principal's skills should be assessed prior to the pre-service residency to determine the individual's strengths and improvement needs related to the effective school leadership competencies, and this data should be used to assist in developing and refining a data-based professional development plan. During the pre-service residency, aspiring principals should be assigned a mentor who possesses an interest in supporting a potential school leader through their skills in emotional intelligence, actual experience in the practice, and commitment to furthering the profession of educational leadership. New school leaders should receive the benefits of induction for up to three years. Mentoring can adapt to fit the inductee's needs and has the potential to span the entire career of the new leader if the relationship entails trust and authenticity. At a minimum, inductees need the support and guidance of a veteran during the formative years.

Rating of Preparation Programs

NAESP and NASSP have concerns about any proposed grant program that would require states to rate all preparation programs using value-added measures (VAM) and other measures. We believe there are multiple ways that states can strengthen accountability and standards for preparation programs without developing such a rating system, which will conflate the multiple concerns that research has exposed in terms of the efficacy of VAM with teacher and principal evaluations. We prefer an approach that measures leadership and instructional competencies to determine the readiness of an individual to serve as the principal and sets high standards for preparation programs.

Professional Development

The mission of NAESP and NASSP is to support strong instructional leadership skills of the nation's principals and other schools leaders. Pre-service and on-going, job-embedded professional development for principals has been largely overlooked by states and local districts because it receives little or no specific attention in current law. Research and evidence over the past ten years has proven that, next to excellent teachers, principals are the second most important factor to improved student performance.

NAESP and NASSP encourage any federal programs to focus on preparation and on-going training for principals related to their own professional learning needs, such as how to effectively

evaluate teachers in order to differentiate teacher performance accurately; provide useful feedback; and use evaluation results to inform decisionmaking about professional development, improvement strategies, and personnel decisions in their schools. We support proposals to assist principals in meeting their professional learning needs, particularly those opportunities for learning and growth that are tied to any state systems of principal evaluation. In addition, NAESP and NASSP support professional learning that supports appropriate instructional leadership practice to meet the needs of students and teachers related to the transitions from prekindergarten to the primary school years, as well as middle to high school.

Literacy

As active members of Advocates for Literacy, NAESP and NASSP support programs to develop or improve the implementation of comprehensive literacy programs from birth to grade 12. A renewed focus on comprehensive literacy education is crucial and necessary for all students to be college and career ready. These more rigorous standards will require the reorientation of literacy education as a systematic progression of skills across all grades. Specifically, college and career-ready standards will require increased text complexity and inclusion of informational text, which will necessitate more literacy instruction and support from birth throughout all levels of education. Addressing this issue within principal preparation programs is critical to help every principal acquire strong instructional leadership skills to support the learning needs of students.

Early Childhood

As states and districts continue to expand early childhood education programs, particularly connected to local elementary schools, it is imperative that policies are developed at the federal, state and districts levels to create systems that both recognize and build the capacity of elementary principal leadership within a pre-K-3 continuum. Preparation programs must help principals enter the profession understanding how to create a seamless continuum of learning from pre-K-3 and better grasp developmentally appropriate practices in the early years, and how to align both early learning and K-3 state standards, assessment and curriculum, as well as the use of data to improve teaching and learning.

NAESP and NASSP thank you for your efforts to reauthorize HEA and work to better support principals as they prepare to lead learning communities. We look forward to continuing the discussion, and working with you and members of the committee around educator preparation and the areas identified in this letter to ensure that the best, brightest and most committed become teachers and school leaders, they are well-prepared and supported on the job, and they are appropriately compensated for their effectiveness and hard work so they remain in the classroom and in the school. Both our organizations share your commitment to providing every student with a high quality education and the opportunity to succeed.

Sincerely,



Gail Connelly
Executive Director
NAESP



JoAnn Bartoletti
Executive Director
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