

Relationships Are Key to Common Core Success

I recently heard an NAESP member say that it takes three things to be a great educator: content, pedagogy, and relationships. I would add that it also takes talent to know how to leverage those three factors in varying degrees to achieve the best results. While principals have never been more challenged to provide exceptional instructional leadership that requires a unique blend of expert content knowledge and pedagogical fluency, more than ever, their focus on relationships is proving to be key to the success of our nation's schools.

That lesson rang true this past November, during NAESP's second annual Principal Shadowing Day, when four dozen U.S. Department of Education officials walked in the shoes of principals. They received quite a workout over the course of their day, visiting numerous classrooms and engaging in principals' daily routines that involved countless relationship-building activities.

The goal of Principal Shadowing Day was to allow decision-makers to experience how policy impacts practice by illuminating the realities of principals' jobs, such as leading instructional shifts and implementing new curricula aligned to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). This year is sure to bring a new set of challenges as many schools make the transition to the new assessments. In New York, for instance, test scores dropped 30 percent when the state introduced new CCSS-aligned assessments last spring. This is to be expected, as teachers and students shift to new ways of teaching and learning that are designed to prepare all students to be college- and career-ready. Principals are on the front lines of helping district leaders, parents, and other stakeholders understand the intricacies and impacts of these educational policies and what it means for students and schools.

So, Where Are We?

Principals, as local facilitators of change, are steering their schools through numerous CCSS implementation hurdles. Recently, NAESP polled over 1,000 principals in 14 states to gauge how these tasks are progressing, compiling the results into *Leadership for the Common Core*. A majority of the principals surveyed report that their curricular modifications are well underway, and that staff members have received professional development on CCSS. Most have a leadership plan and timeline in place, and have gathered evidence to assess the effects of the standards on teaching.

Growing pains are expected with any new initiative.



Principals are challenged to be problem-solvers, especially in terms of allocating already-scarce funding for updating technology to support new assessments and purchasing new CCSS-aligned textbooks. In our survey, one-third or less of the principals have yet integrated

the CCSS into expanded learning opportunities or into programs for supporting English-language learners or special education students. Further, and perhaps most important, many principals' own professional learning needs have not yet been met.

Where We're Going

If these challenges seem daunting, it's true: The road to CCSS implementation is incredibly demanding. In the face of limited resources, a dearth of deep professional learning opportunities, and anxiety from school communities, principals are piecing together implementation and leading with resilience. And for schools to succeed in the long run, principals and school communities must work hard together with patience and understanding.

The CCSS aims to boost and deepen students' skill mastery, and more than 80 percent of the principals in our survey believe that the CCSS can achieve these goals. Even the new standards-aligned assessments offer an opportunity to transform practice. For principals, making this goal a reality entails continuing to support teachers, seeking out learning opportunities, and sustaining a culture of positivity through the change process. For school communities, this presents a distinct call to action: Be open to principals' leadership, and treat educators as partners.

On Principal Shadowing Day back in November, one of the host principals said he participated in the event to show policymakers that schools are complex and multifaceted. What I think he meant is this: We can't judge our students by how they perform on a single test. Instead, we must view students as multi-talented, social, emotional, kinesthetic learners in process, with both strengths to celebrate and weaknesses to examine and address. By the same token, we can't judge our schools solely by how well students perform on assessments in the very first year of such a sweeping new initiative as the Common Core.

Principals are often required to explain the realities of school reform initiatives and gain widespread support for the monumental shifts that are required as a result of well-intentioned—but sometimes misguided and often conflicting—educational policies. We hope that every member of a school community—teachers, superintendents, parents, and partners—will join principals as allies in building strong relationships and working together to prepare students for success in school and life in a world that we can barely imagine. ■