Good, Better, Best

Superlatives usually make me curious. Who determines what is the greatest, fastest, strongest, best (especially the best) anything? Based on what yardstick?

In our consumer-driven economy, advertisers and marketers apply the best label to everything from laundry detergent to presidential candidates and social causes to persuade us to buy a product, support a candidate, donate to a cause, or take some other specific action. But in elementary and middle-level education, the superlative best—particularly as it is applied to practices—has quite different connotations.

First, and most important, you get to say what’s a best practice. The term “best practice” typically describes what works in a particular situation. What works in your school, for your culture and community, and given the unique needs of your students and teachers might not work in a neighboring school that operates in a different environment. It’s your knowledge of your school, understanding of available resources, and wisdom about your circumstances that transform standard practices to best practices.

Second, by calling one practice “best” doesn’t mean that another is the “worst.” The practical reality for principals, especially in these times of heightened accountability, is that they evaluate and draw from a wide range of practices (whether good, better, or best) to support teachers and help students succeed. Principals are masters of absorbing, filtering, and modifying practices to piece together a blended strategy that sustains an entire learning community. Not only are principals adaptable and pragmatic, but they also know that one practice, approach, or technique simply will not work for all students and teachers.

Rather, principals need access to a wide range of practices. A full 99 percent of members—virtually every individual who responded to our most recent market research survey—said they were extremely interested or interested in best practices on several topics: instructional leadership, teacher development, school improvement, assessment tools, technology, 21st century learning, development of multiple measures, and the Common Core, just to name a few.

With this nearly unanimous response as a touchstone, NAESP set out to research, develop, and disseminate new and existing best-practice resources for members. I’m delighted to share a summary of a few:

**Principal Magazine.** This issue focuses on best practices from many perspectives, including a case study for putting research into practice, a round-up of classroom-tested practices from nine 2011 National Distinguished Principals, and insight into strengthening teacher evaluations.

**Annual Conference.** NAESP’s conference, underway in Seattle as this Principal reaches most readers’ desks, has been re-framed as the Best Practice for Better Schools Conference™, a theme that will continue for future years. Through a combination of powerful keynote addresses, insightful plenary sessions, and substantive concurrent sessions, the conference delivers advice, insight, and guidance to help principals apply best practices to their instructional leadership.

**Doing What Works.** NAESP was the only national organization selected to disseminate the research-based practices featured on Doing What Works (DWW), a U.S. Department of Education website that offers one of the most comprehensive repositories of best practices, resources, tools, and sample materials pertinent to instructional leadership. Go to NAESP’s website—www.naesp.org—for resources and related links.

**Online White Papers.** NAESP has published several online white papers (based on DWW resources and others) as part of the new publication series, Best Practices for Better Schools. Topics include preschool language and literacy, response to intervention in elementary and middle-level math, response to intervention in primary grade reading, and using student achievement data to support instructional decision-making.

**ASSISTments.** NAESP is partnering with the developers of a powerful, free web-based assessment tool that enables principals to create common assessments across an entire grade level or school, use data-based formative assessments to track student learning, and build benchmarks aligned to common core standards.

**Principal Evaluation.** This NAESP initiative, conducted with Johns Hopkins University and the American Institutes for Research along with the National Association of Secondary School Principals and principals nationwide, will result in the development of research-based guidelines to inform the development of best practices for state and local principal evaluation systems.

As NAESP further develops these and other best-practice resources, we do so with a single goal in mind: to measure up to our superlatives as we strive to provide you with the best resources available so you can lead the greatest schools possible and help all children reach their fullest potential.