

The “A” Word

School leaders welcome rigorous standards of accountability.



Gail Connelly,
Executive Director,
National Association of
Elementary School Principals



Daniel Domenech,
Executive Director,
American Association of
School Administrators



JoAnn Bartoletti,
Executive Director,
National Association of
Secondary School Principals

President Harry Truman famously displayed a sign on his desk in the Oval Office proclaiming that “the buck stops here,” a notice that served as a reminder of his unconditional responsibility to make decisions and signaled his readiness to be accountable for their consequences.

For K-12 education, the buck stops at the doorstep of school and district education leaders. As representatives of and advocates for the vast majority of the nation’s principals and superintendents, we say bring it on.

The principals and superintendents with whom we talk every day tell us that being held accountable for school improvement and student achievement is akin to displaying a badge of honor. Many see their work as a calling, both ennobling to those who do it and enabling to our society, which depends on it. They’re not finger-pointers, disgruntled complainers, or spotlight-seekers. And they don’t pass the buck. The fact of the matter is clear-cut: They are, and always have been, highly accountable for what teachers teach, what students learn, and how schools perform.

They routinely manifest the vision, wisdom, and knowledge required to cultivate learning communities where all children are encouraged to achieve their highest potential. They lead and inspire teachers to create classrooms where every student has an equal chance to learn and a clear pathway for doing so. They strive to make schools and districts portals to 21st century learning where creativity, collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving are as valued as basic competencies in reading and math. What’s more, they go about their difficult and complex work despite conflicting federal and state requirements, ever-shrinking funds to cover outsized mandates, a clamor to “fix broken schools,” and, too often, one-dimensional, simplistic, and ineffectual evaluation systems of their schools and themselves.

It’s this last point that complicates the accountability discussion. Yes, let’s hold school leaders accountable. But the often unspoken question in this debate persists: What are the conditions and results for which school leaders should be held accountable?

The answer is more, not less. School leaders should be evaluated against a wide range of meaningful outcomes—not only the narrow results of standardized test scores. Students, schools, and school leaders succeed in multiple ways; they must be assessed in multiple ways. Yet we typically decide whether students, schools, principals, and superintendents fail or

succeed on the merits of fill-in-the-bubble testing instruments that can’t possibly measure the higher-order skills we know children and young people need to be college- and career-ready in this century.

Improved principal evaluation systems are long overdue, both because the U.S. Department of Education initiatives such as Race to the Top set unprecedented standards for accountability for school leaders and because principals have an undeniable impact on student achievement. That is the conclusion of two nationally renowned education researchers, Matthew Clifford, senior research scientist, American Institutes for Research, and Steven Ross, professor of education, Center for Research and Reform in Education, Johns Hopkins University.

Clifford and Ross recently completed a scan of current research and discovered that principal evaluation practices hold great promise for strengthening principals and improving schools, but the research also raises serious questions about the consistency, fairness, and value of such practices. When we allow these flawed practices to continue, we’re overlooking a proven strategy for improving schools.

It’s time for a new framework for evaluating principals’ performance—one that reflects the complexity of the job and measures the leadership competencies required for student and school success. As this new school year begins, NAESP and NASSP have joined in a partnership to create such a framework, an initiative supported by AASA.

NAESP and NASSP, both of which have published highly acclaimed professional standards for what principals should know and be able to do, are convening a broad coalition of stakeholders to develop and review comprehensive principal evaluation guidelines that are research-based and practitioner-informed. The ultimate goals are to guide state and district practices, inform federal and state policy, and link evaluation to professional development that strengthens principals’ capacity. This work is rooted in the bedrock value that evaluation processes must be wielded as carrots to encourage improvement, not sticks to reprimand recalcitrant individuals.

As this work unfolds, let’s lay to rest the myth alleging that school leaders are reluctant to embrace accountability. Nothing could be further from the truth. They welcome high standards of accountability; they always have. Let’s just be sure we’re measuring the things that matter most to teaching, learning, and school improvement.