

Leveraging Principals to Ensure Safe and Successful School Reopenings

As schools prepare for the 2020-2021 school year, big questions loom for education leaders: What will reopening schools look like this fall? How can it be done safely? Who needs to be at the table making these decisions? If Congress provides an additional influx of federal funding to support school reopenings, how best should these funds be allocated?

Despite significant uncertainty surrounding reopening schools, one thing is clear: Safely reopening schools will take an all-hands-on-deck approach with strong buy-in from a wide range of stakeholders. **With this in mind, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) urges state and local leaders to ensure principals—the individuals whose core job it will be to implement reopening plans—are meaningfully consulted during school reopening plan development and implementation.** The success of any reopening plan hinges on the extent to which those implementing the plan believe in it, had a hand in shaping it, and feel empowered to carry it out. Here are four considerations:

1. Provide Principals With Resources to Implement School Reopening Plans



In March 2020, Congress passed the CARES Act, which included \$13.2 billion for an Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund and \$2.95 billion for a Governor's Emergency Education Relief fund. This emergency funding sought to help schools respond to the pandemic by providing

resources for enhanced cleaning and sterilizing schools; providing additional student meals; and boosting remote learning opportunities. As states and districts continue to make CARES Act and other resource allocation decisions, the goal should be to get funds where they are needed the most: in schools.

In the coming weeks, Congress is expected to provide additional funding to districts and schools through "Educational Stabilization Funds." Funding levels could reach tens of billions of dollars and will aim to help districts and states reopen safely in the coming months. **Allocation of such funds should focus on ensuring schools have ample funding to address the array of staffing, sanitization, and instructional needs to reopen safely. It will be important to engage principals directly about their school-level needs and ensure that they and their staff have sufficient resources to confront the daily on-the-ground challenges they will face in the coming months.**

Principals will navigate difficult day-to-day decisions on everything from staffing and testing procedures to supporting a variety of instructional models. Listening to principals and their funding needs will be vital to implement reopening plans with fidelity and in a way that meets the needs of students, families, and educators.

In a survey* conducted by NAESP, principals identified the following priorities as "extremely important" to ensure schools can open safely:

- ▶ *Enhanced cleaning protocols (87 percent)*
- ▶ *Personal protective equipment (75 percent)*
- ▶ *Providing additional school buses and drivers (57 percent)*
- ▶ *Hiring additional staff to implement safety protocols (55 percent)*

2. Ensure Principal Representation on School Reopening Teams



Critically, principals must have a seat at the table during school reopening discussions. With decisions being made about everything from reorienting instructional spaces in schools to how best to protect students and staff to which instructional models will best serve student needs, principals must be engaged in these conversations. When

principals are part of these discussions, they gain insights into the decision-making process, which can help them provide their staff with the rationale as to why certain policies are being pursued and why certain decisions were made.

Ultimately, reopening plans are words on a paper; how they are implemented is the barometer of success. Principals need to be well positioned to navigate the myriad of challenges they will confront with reopening their school building. This starts with ensuring school leaders have buy-in throughout the process and feel empowered to implement the reopening plan.

Beyond having a seat at the table, principal representation should be diverse—demographically, geographically, by school type and by position—to increase the likelihood that reopening plans work for schools across the district, no matter their size, location, or demographics. NAESP encourages states and districts to proactively seek out a diverse group of principals and invite them into these conversations.

ONLY 35%

of respondents indicated they **had been consulted** “a lot” on their school district’s reopening plan,

WHILE 17%

indicated they **had not been consulted** “at all.”

3. Boost Principals as Instructional and Emotional Support Leaders



Research is clear that principals are critical to advancing successful teaching and learning. With deep concerns about student learning loss during the pandemic, especially among the most vulnerable students, now more than ever, boosting principals as instructional leaders takes on new urgency.

Principals set the tone for schools. As instructional leaders, they establish school-wide instructional goals and then coach, mentor, and support their staff to improve instruction. Principals are in classrooms observing and evaluating instruction, coaching and mentoring, and connecting staff with professional learning opportunities. In the coming months, as principals identify the unique instructional needs of their school, ensuring principals have ample support and resources—including access to high-quality professional development and bolstered staffing—to support effective instruction will be paramount.

In regard to learning loss for students:

64 percent of respondents indicated they were “very concerned,” with 60 percent saying they’ve developed a plan to address learning loss but 90 percent saying they need additional funding to efficiently execute their plans.

Beyond the severe impact on academic achievement, school closures have caused trauma and increased mental health challenges for students. Being physically out of school for months has upended students' support systems, creating isolation, deepening anxiety, and making it difficult for school-based mental health professionals to reach students. When schools reopen, school leaders will have to assess the scope and depth of the impact the pandemic and school closures have had on students and identify which supports are needed to help these students heal. To meet these needs, principals will need additional funding to expand school-based mental health programs, provide trauma sensitivity in their schools, and train staff to better understand trauma's impact on their students.

4. Leverage Principals' Relationships with Parents, Families, and Community Members



According to the Pew Research Center, Americans trust K-12 principals more than other authority figures to be caring, to provide fair and accurate information, and to handle resources responsibly. This trust and goodwill will be extraordinarily valuable in the coming months.

Districts can leverage principals in “ambassador” type roles to engage directly with parents, families, and community members. The coronavirus pandemic has forever changed the principalship, but a principal’s role as the nexus for various stakeholders in the K-12 ecosystem will endure.

With significant uncertainty surrounding school reopenings, principals—and the trusting relationships they have developed with students and families—will be key to effectively communicating and engaging with these relevant stakeholders. Further, as schools reopen, new issues and concerns will arise, and setbacks are likely. Principals will be critical to navigating these choppy waters. As this document emphasizes, providing principals a seat at the table through all phases of school reopenings—development, implementation, and ongoing course correction—will be essential to ensuring safe school reopenings across the country.

According to a 2019 Pew Research Center survey, “Why Americans Don’t Fully Trust Many Who Hold Positions of Power and Responsibility,” 84 percent of respondents think principals care about the students they serve “some of the time” or “all or most of the time.”

Principals were rated above journalists, members of Congress, and technology leaders.

K-12 public school principals ranked highest on questions probing whether U.S. adults agreed that a professional type “cares about others or people like me”, “provides fair and accurate information to the public”, and “handles resources responsibly.”

*About the Research

Data is from a survey of principals conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals. The survey, conducted from July 7-16, 2020, includes 798 total responses from NAESP members—both principals and assistant principals—in all 50 states.

“We know the critical role that principals play in leading successful schools, so it’s paramount that their voice is being heard during school reopening planning and implementation discussions,” says NAESP Executive Director L. Earl Franks, Ed.D., CAE. “It is clear that the success of reopening plans hinges on whether those implementing the plan believe in it, had a hand in shaping it, and feel empowered to carry it out. This guidance document will help education leaders at all levels engage principals, leverage their expertise, and work together to safely reopen schools when the time is right in their community.”

Access the full survey results at www.naesp.org/2020reopeningsurvey.