What will the profession of school principals look like a decade from now? What trends in society and education will affect how principals work? Since 2006, NAESP has been attempting to answer those and other questions. Looking ahead to 2021, the year the Association will celebrate its 100th birthday, NAESP spent 18 months examining trends in leadership, education, and society to make reasonable predictions about the world elementary and middle school principals will face. NAESP worked with the Institute for Alternative Futures to identify strategic issues that will affect schools, and conducted a series of focus groups with principal-leaders to discuss provocative forecasts, create scenarios for the future, and continually relate them to everyday experiences principals face today.

The nine provocative forecasts are:

- Schools are the learning portals to a global workplace;
- Free market forces create tensions between school choice and education equity;
- Hyperlinked learning explores meaning through multimedia;
- Scientific knowledge and technology bring new understanding to child brain development;
- Holistic standards expand expectations for achieving student potential;
- Networks of learning innovation experiment with new learning strategies for children;
- The surveillance society links schools to electronic safety networks;
- Society’s mounting debts compromise future investments in education; and
- Principals set the standard as lead advocates for learning.

The following is an excerpt from the culminating report, Vision 2021: Transformations in Leading, Learning, and Community, which examines trends in leadership, society, and education to create reasonable scenarios of what schools might look like in the next 10 years.

School Leadership

A conventional view of leadership in the 20th century, in which the charismatic leader stands atop the organization and almost single-handedly directs its operations, is giving way to a view in which leaders inspire excellence in the organization and build a coalition of individuals committed to collectively attaining greatness.

Rather than asking leaders to use managing skills to control every aspect of an organization, increasingly complex organizations like schools—which require knowledge of instruction, budgeting, law, and human relations, among other things—require leaders with a sufficiently broad set of knowledge and skills.

This emerging type of leadership requires a more specialized set of skills. In an influential study of leadership in the social sector, including schools, business expert Jim Collins argues that effective leadership, which he calls “legislative” leadership, “relies more upon persuasion, political currency, and shared interests to create the conditions for the right decisions to happen.”

This type of leader keeps his or her eye on the vision of the organization and makes sure that everyone within the organization does what needs to be done.
to attain it. In that respect, the leader is not so much a driver of change within an organization but rather a catalyst.

Such a view demands a different set of skills than those typically attributed to leaders. In his 2008 book, *The Six Secrets of Change: What the Best Leaders Do To Help Their Organizations Survive and Thrive*, Michael Fullan identifies five hallmarks of effective school leadership:

- Moral purpose, or a commitment to making a difference not only in students’ lives, but in the social environment as a whole;
- Understanding of the change process;
- Relationship improvement;
- Knowledge creation and sharing; and
- Coherence-making.

These characteristics are a far cry from the Lone Ranger-type leader from the industrial model that required it. New leadership requires relational skills to ensure that others within the organization are motivated and able to work well together to carry out the school’s vision.

In addition, leaders increasingly draw on the skills and expertise of others in the school community to take on leadership tasks. As external pressures for improvement become more intense and internal challenges to success increase, principals are likely to find that the need for sharing leadership becomes greater. The complex task of enabling every student to learn to high levels will require more diverse expertise, both within and outside schools, and principals will need to apply substantial skills to marshal the leadership necessary to succeed with every student.

“I think we’ll have to do some more systemic thinking about the resources we have for leading and managing a school,” says James Spillane, professor at the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University. “Most schools have a principal and other formally designated leaders. How these resources are deployed is critical. We also have to think about the informal leaders of the organization and how to mobilize them in order to help the principal lead effectively. Basically you have to think about leadership and management from a different perspective. The expertise for leading and managing should be distributed, and not just focused on what the principal knows.”

**Community Leadership**

In addition to leading schools, principals will increasingly play a visible role in the community. The growing recognition of the importance of schools in community development and well-being will mean that principals will be at the table for community decisions about housing, work-force development, and other vital issues. At the same time, principals will increasingly engage the community to build support for education policy changes.

“We’re hearing from our principals that the community expects them to be part of [that community], rather than a chief building manager,” says Steven T. Heck, the executive director of the Indiana Association of School Principals. “In building community support for innovations for changes to be made in schools, it requires communications and marketing skills. At one time that was delegated to our central office leadership. Community partners, business leaders, and principals must all be involved in school improvement committees. I think that’s a little different than what the expectations once were.”

One important leadership role is representing the school to parents and the public. This public role will be particularly vital in places where parents can choose among schools. In such communities, there is likely to be a much wider array of school options than ever before. Schools will emphasize a curricular focus or a pedagogical approach, such as project-based learning tied to student results. Principals, then, must lead efforts to market schools to prospective parents.

School choice is likely to become more prevalent over the next decade. Many Americans like to choose among various options and view choosing schools as an appropriate way to find the best fit for their children.

Public school choice has expanded rapidly since 1992, when the first charter school opened in Minnesota. In all, the proportion of students who enrolled in a public school of their choice rose from 11 percent to 15 percent between 1993 and 2003. And 51 percent of parents in 2003 reported they had the option to choose a school for their children.

The growing prevalence of choice will require principals to pay more attention to their ‘customers.’”