The K-8 Principal in 2008

A 10-Year Study

Eighth in a Series of Research Studies Launched in 1928
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National Association of Elementary School Principals
Serving America’s Elementary and Middle School Administrators
The mission of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) is to lead in the advocacy and support for elementary and middle level principals and other education leaders in their commitment to all children. NAESP is the strongest unified voice for pre-K-8 leaders across the U.S. and around the world. NAESP was founded in 1921 by a visionary group of principals who sought to advance the profession. Today, NAESP provides the professional support system and the critical information that you need 24/7!

Educational Research Service is the nonprofit organization serving the research and information needs of the nation’s preK-12 education leaders and the public. Founded by the national school management associations, ERS provides quality, objective research and information that enable education leaders to make the most effective school decisions in both day-to-day operations and long-range planning.

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Foreword

The K-8 Principal in 2008: A 10-Year Study is the eighth in a series of research studies conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals since 1928—and the first study conducted since the beginning of the 21st Century. To commemorate this milestone, our author revisited many of our previous studies to compare their findings with those of the 2008 survey. These comparisons can be found throughout the publication and provide some interesting documentation on the changing nature of the principalship. The 10-year study is, however, about the present. It offers a wealth of information about the current education climate, the challenges principals face, the students they serve, and the conditions under which they work. It can also assist us in making certain predictions about the future. The leadership and staff of NAESP rely on the data from each successive survey to guide us in strengthening our advocacy and outreach, delivering services, and providing professional development opportunities to address the most pressing needs of our members.

Over the past decade, schools have operated in a climate increasingly focused on accountability, perhaps best exemplified by the much-debated No Child Left Behind legislation. Respondents to the 2008 survey provide thoughtful assessments of three key aspects of NCLB: They are positive about the intent of the law in focusing our attention on the needs of underserved students; they are concerned, however, that implementation that relies on standardized testing in a few subject areas places undue stress on teachers and thwarts their best efforts to provide students with a rich and varied curriculum; and they question the impact NCLB has had on raising the achievement of the very students it was designed to assist.

Respondents’ prioritization of professional development needs offers insight into the challenges they face, including differentiating instruction, improving staff and student performance, maintaining positive school climate, understanding and applying technology, and managing change. Program-related concerns reflect the increasing diversity of the children they serve. These concerns include provision of services for at-risk students, assessment, an increase in students with emotional problems, inclusion of special education students, and serving a growing population of English Language Learners and culturally diverse students.
Conditions of employment are a source of additional pressure for principals. The 2008 survey data indicate that principals spend an average of 56 hours a week at school or in school-related activities, an increase of 2 hours since 1998 and 6 hours since 1988. While their average salaries have increased, so has the length of their work year, and few have an opportunity to earn merit pay. The 2008 data also indicate an alarming decrease in the number of principals who have tenure—particularly among the least-experienced principals—and tenure typically does not guarantee ongoing employment as a principal. Two-thirds of the respondents indicate that student performance is taken into account in their evaluations.

The 2008 data show a substantial increase in the number of female principals, a growing trend first noted in 1998. Unfortunately, there has been a slight decrease in the number of minority principals—particularly disturbing in light of the increased diversity of our student population and the resulting need to provide these children with strong role models. The age at which individuals are becoming principals for the first time has also risen since the 1998 survey, perhaps reflecting the additional experience required for this complex position. However, this trend also indicates that the need to replace retiring principals, first predicted in 1998, will continue over the next decade, making it imperative that universities and education organizations focus their efforts on recruiting, training, and mentoring aspiring principals.

The study also reports a sense of optimism and professional fulfillment among principals, despite the many challenges they face. Most respondents indicate that their morale is high, and they continue to experience satisfaction in their work. Most say that if they were offered the choice of becoming principals today, they would do so again. This is the best news our survey can report. The leadership and staff of NAESP are proud to serve these dedicated school leaders and remain committed to our mission of supporting their efforts on behalf of children.

Gail Connelly
Executive Director
Preface

This 10-year study of the elementary school principalship is the eighth of its kind published by NAESP. The association’s understanding of the importance of both current and trend data on the elementary school principalship and the people serving in this position—and its commitment to collecting this information—provides a valuable resource. The data contained in the study can help support efforts to highlight the importance of the principal to providing a high-quality education for all students, provide information for groups and institutions of higher education developing preparation programs, and assist NAESP with planning future initiatives and services.

Writing in the 1988 report, Jim Doud, a past president of NAESP and author of two of the 10-year reports, talks about the nature of the studies:

Together they provide both a running account of the factors that affect the status of the K-8 principal and a perspective on the societal changes that have shaped American education during the past 60 years and that continue to be of interest to principals. (1988, p. xiii)

In the Foreword to the 1968 report, the Department of Elementary School Principals talks about that report’s findings as well as those that preceded it: They “all reflect the growing status, improving preparation, and promising opportunities of those who now guide the destinies of nearly 30 million children” (1968, p. 4). Bill Pharis, a past-Executive Director of NAESP, and Sally Zakariya agree and write in the 1978 report that, “The studies reflect not only the changing status of the elementary school principal, but also the changing concerns of those who occupy the position” (1979, p. xiii).
Questions included on each of the surveys represent an attempt to generate a comprehensive picture of the characteristics of elementary school principals; their attitudes about schools, the principalship, and their preparation for the position; and the assessment of problems facing their schools. This effort to get a comprehensive picture must also recognize the need for a balance between asking questions that generate trend data—thus, for example, respondents are asked each time about their level of education—and those that speak to issues of the day. For example, the 1968 study included questions about the then-contentious issue of teacher collective bargaining. The 2008 survey asked principals for their opinions about the impact of NCLB.

“Collectively, the [10-year] studies provide an important historical overview of changing educational and societal conditions. Individually, they provide insights into the issues pertinent to their time.

[This] study continues that rich history. The insights it provides have implications not only for those who are currently elementary school principals, but also for those who are involved in preparing the next generation of principals, for the school districts that employ them, and for the policy makers whose decisions affect their work.” (Doud & Keller, 1998, p. xii)

Another hallmark of the 10-year study from its inception in 1928 has been an intentional effort to describe the results of the surveys in ways that would be useful for a wide variety of purposes. The data junkies among us take pleasure in delving into numbers. They look at tables of numbers and ask “what does this mean?” And the information from any of the 10-year studies could be simply that—dozens and dozens of tables of numbers. But from the first, NAESP—then the Department of Elementary School Principals—recognized the importance of providing descriptive text along with the tables to highlight potentially useful information and thus increasing the likelihood that a variety of users could benefit from it.
Some of these highlights focus on the current year’s data—for example, what are the opinions about NCLB that principals express in this study? Other times, they take a look at potentially significant data trends. For example, how do principals today describe their morale compared to principals from 10, or even 20, years ago? Such highlights, accompanied by tables of data for those who wanted to do their own more detailed study, have been used by NAESP in program planning and by others such as universities planning graduate preparation programs for future principals.

In his foreword to the 1998 study, then-Executive Director Sam Sava talked about the importance of the 10-year study to NAESP’s efforts to meet the needs of the profession:

_The K-8 Principal in 1998_ is the seventh in a series of research studies that began in 1928…. During my tenure, I have consulted this publication often in directing the energy and fiscal resources of our association and in developing professional training materials or programs for our nation’s principals. It has helped me to better understand the emerging issues facing principals today.

In this report, we add to this knowledge base that now spans 80 years. The 10-year reports have often compared newly collected data to that analyzed for the previous 10-year study. However, since this report is the first of the 21st century, it seemed to be a good time to devote more attention to the history of our profession. Thus, trend data for some items look back further than 10 years. In addition, some highlights titled _A Retrospective Look_ have been included. Some of these highlights sound as though they could have been written today, while others definitely speak of education in a different time. But together with other text and data in this 2008 report, they provide a rich perspective on the evolution of the elementary school principalship and of elementary education.
A Retrospective Look—Our Association

In the summer of 1920, there began at the University of Chicago a movement to organize the elementary school principals of the country into one national organization. The committee formed for this purpose consisted of elementary school principals from many states. By February 1921, the committee had organized a program and held its first meeting with the Department of Superintendence at Atlantic City. A small association was formed looking forward to the general summer meeting at Des Moines. At the Des Moines meeting a constitution was adopted, officers chosen, and the organization became a department of the National Education Association.

It is of particular interest to the Committee on Standards and Training for the Elementary School Principalship [authors of the 1928 report] that the Department from its inception had as a major purpose the elevation of the scholarship and administrative ability of elementary school principals. (Committee on Standards and Training for the Elementary School Principalship, 1928, pp. 155)

About the 10-Year Study

Authors of the 1948 report suggest that “one purpose of the 1928 yearbook was to suggest that the elementary school principalship is a ‘strategic position’” (1948, p. 69). The first study of the elementary school principalship was conducted in 1928, the second in 1948, and then in 1958. This decision to do the study every 10 years, instead of allowing a 20-year gap, came about “since the principalship has moved rapidly into professionalism” (1958, NEA Research Division, p. vii).

To provide some context, it is interesting to note that NAESP was a department of the National Education Association in 1928. This relationship continued until increased NEA support for teacher collective bargaining caused administrator groups, viewed as sitting on the opposite side of the bargaining table from teachers, to form independent associations such as NAESP, the National
Association of Secondary School Principals, and the American Association of School Administrators. Thus, the first four 10-year studies were conducted by the Department of Elementary School Principals. Research support was provided even then by the Educational Research Service, which was a department of the NEA Research Division.

Planning for each of the 10-year studies begins with detailed discussions about the questions that should be asked. Two guidelines drove development of the content for the new version. First, some questions are repeated in each of the surveys, with the responses yielding valuable trend data about principals, the principalship, and schools. Second, each survey intentionally included items that focused on factors with a significant impact on schools at that time. For example, this year’s survey included questions about principals’ assessment of the types of impact NCLB has had on their schools.

For the 2008 study, the principals recognized in the acknowledgements talked both about the big issues and about the nuances of wording each question. For, when a study is done only once every 10 years, it’s important to do it “right.” Simply looking at some of the questions asked in previous 10-year studies provides some sense of the changing context of education, as well as often-dramatic shifts in what was considered important—and appropriate—to ask. For example, here are some topics addressed on previous surveys:

- What effect is collective bargaining in public education having on public opinion?
- Are you single, married, widowed, or divorced?
- Do you belong to a church?
- What is your salary and how much do you need for “living essentials” each year? (No overall mean salary was reported until 1958; instead, salaries for male and female principals were reported separately.)
• How are you registered—Democrat, Republican, Independent, or other?

• How would you describe your office facilities? Responses provided ranged from *tiptop in space and equipment; could not ask for more* (14%) to *have no real office for a principal* (4%).

Surveys are sent to a random sample of elementary school principals, and in 2008—for the first time—these principals responded online. Appreciation is due to each of the elementary school principals who took time during their busy days to provide responses that together form a comprehensive picture of elementary education, the principalship, and the people who hold these positions.
Methodology

NAESP supplied two data sets—association members and prospects—to the Educational Research Service (ERS) for the survey. Both data sets were composed of elementary school principals in schools that included grade 5. ERS prepared the lists for the survey, including comparing the number of principals per state from both data sets with national statistics to ensure that the data accurately reflected the population of elementary school principals on a state-by-state basis. ERS then identified a random sample of 3,300 individuals from both data sets to target as survey recipients. Individuals from both data sets received the same survey instrument.

Targeted individuals received a letter explaining the study and asking them to participate. Each individual was given the option of taking and submitting the survey online using a provided password that could be used once or taking the survey via a paper copy that was flagged with a unique identification number. The paper copy was provided as a PDF that recipients could print, complete, and mail. In addition, each individual received two follow-up letters to encourage participation. 594 recipients completed the survey. All responses were collected as one survey data set, and the final survey report does not distinguish NAESP member responses from those sent by nonmembers.

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