My only experience with politics took place several years ago, when I helped write some campaign literature for my son, a novice politician who was running for the state legislature against a popular incumbent. It wasn’t much of a race; my son lost the election by a huge margin. But what impressed me was the civility of the campaign. In their literature and debates, the candidates discussed issues without personal attacks or accusations. After the election, they even became friends.

I bring this up to make a point: Politics doesn’t have to be a dirty or demeaning business. I don’t know of any principals who have run for public office (although I’m sure there are some), but there are many other areas where knowledge of the political process can be a valuable asset, and we address a number of them in this issue.

Benjamin Piltch and Robert Fredericks offer some practical advice on how to anticipate and avoid situations involving political considerations in dealing with parents, teachers, teacher unions, the central office, parent organizations, school boards, and community groups.

Joseph Casbarro describes three politically-charged issues involved in high-stakes testing: How test scores are used; whether the tests truly reflect student ability; and how public perception of schools is unfairly based on test results.

Sally McConnell, NAESP’s associate executive director for government relations, emphasizes the importance of principals forming a legion of grassroots lobbyists by establishing influential relationships with federal and state legislators and their staffs.

Are you one of those who would never have anything to do with politics? We have news for you: If you are an effective principal, you are practicing politics every day. As Todd Whitaker points out, it could simply be in the way you respond to questions. Cheryl Riggins-Newby goes further, noting that principals live in webs of fluctuating relationships with parents, teachers, staff, and central office personnel, and that they constantly seek to strengthen beneficial relationships and transform harmful ones. “In practicing the art of relationships,” concludes Riggins-Newby, “we are also practicing the art of politics.”

In his Postscript column, NAESP Executive Director Vincent Ferrandino urges principals to involve themselves in influencing political decisions at all levels by quoting former Speaker of the House of Representatives Thomas “Tip” O’Neill, who once declared that “all politics is local.”

Politics can also be polite. You’ll find that you can usually accomplish more with smiles and handshakes than you can with scowls and threats.

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