Policing the Politicians

I often hear principals talk about how the world that today’s students face is growing bigger and more complex, requiring more from them and more from schools.

The same is true for principals. It was not so long ago that principals could take the position that politics and public policy were beyond their realm—that their job was to take care of the kids in their building and stay clear of politics and politicians. But from Capitol Hill to state capitals, politicians have learned that education is an issue that grabs voters’ attention. More and more, the quality of education, the safety of children, and the results taxpayers should expect from their schools have become major issues in political campaigns and legislative debates. It has become increasingly critical for today’s public school principals to become a positive force in education politics.

Every Principal Is an Expert

Congress and state legislatures will be making important decisions about education in the months ahead that will affect your school and your community. Those decisions may hinge on how well principals build relationships with elected leaders that help them see how schools operate, understand educators’ concerns, and consider the political realities of how their decisions will play out back home.

It’s true enough that politics is a different world for principals. But reaching out to federal, state, and local legislators is just an extension of the community engagement that all of you should be doing. Whether the audience is a local civic club or a member of Congress, principals need to be seen as experts on how public education works. Make yourselves known to your political leaders. Invite them to visit your schools. Consult with them on education issues and keep them informed about school accomplishments. Use simple language that they can understand. Offer solutions instead of complaints, and be ready with research that reinforces your perspective.

Don’t Underestimate Your Influence

It’s hard to underestimate how much political clout principals have. It’s one thing for a national association like NAESP to take a position or lobby for an issue. But that message means much more if it’s backed by familiar voices back home who speak up as votes are about to be cast, or who have offered valuable insights or advice in the past. Your political involvement can make the work of our Association much more powerful.

Because these local connections are so important, we have created a variety of resources to help you. Go to www.naesp.org and click on the icon for the Federal Legislative Action Center. There you can review federal lawmakers’ positions on major education issues, see how they have voted, and get their e-mail addresses.

Our Government Relations office is also developing a Key Contact program that will match every member of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives with a K–8 principal in their state or district who will agree to serve as a point person on federal issues. We’re still looking for principals to fill some of those slots.

We also are putting together plans for a Principal for a Day program that will bring community leaders into schools to observe their operation up close and build relationships with their principals. For more information, see our step-by-step guide at www.naesp.org/pfad/.

Know Your Politicians

Working with politicians is important for every principal. In Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do, we recommend that principals get to know politicians at all levels—school board members, city or county executives, and state and federal legislators.

We encourage you to think beyond party lines. When it comes to education, we should all be united in supporting legislation that can help us and opposing legislation that can hurt us.

So, don’t be bashful. Most politicians are eager to build ties with local leaders and often the advice a principal can offer can shed a new light on what they may otherwise have regarded as just another policy issue. By providing a trusted link to the real world of education, principals can become valuable resources in shaping politicians’ thinking about what’s needed to help schools and students succeed.

It’s impossible to deny that the world is getting bigger and more complex all the time, but we also need to remember the oft-quoted words of former U.S. Speaker of the House Thomas “Tip” O’Neill that “all politics is local.” No one should underestimate the important contributions that principals can make in influencing political decisions at all levels.
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