Balancing Accountability With Autonomy and Authority

The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, with its narrowly defined conceptions of school success and accountability, illuminated a widening chasm in understanding the role of the principal. As the chief learning officers of their schools, principals welcome accountability and work daily to help each child achieve his or her highest potential. However, the current version of the ESEA holds principals accountable for student success while overlooking the fact that they often lack the necessary autonomy and authority necessary for achieving desired results.

Principals are key to effective public schools! This fact is emphatically substantiated by recent research conducted by the Wallace Foundation that states “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school related factors” in affecting student learning. Despite this reality, principals often feel they lack the autonomy to effectively lead their schools. Schools thrive under good principal leadership and principals welcome the challenge of making sure that each child, regardless of subgroup status, learns at high levels. Granting principals full authority, autonomy, and responsibility for the schools they lead is one sure path that will lead to increased student achievement.

There is a sense of renewed hope as we welcome a new era of presidential leadership, a new U.S. Secretary of Education, and a new Congress, especially as we prepare for the reauthorization of the ESEA in a way that properly recognizes principal leadership in the scheme of public education. NAESP is devoted to working at every level to support and enhance the role of principals, ensuring they have the resources and knowledge to do what they do best: lead learning communities.

The need for principal autonomy was vigorously discussed and endorsed during the 18 months of collaborative research conducted as a part of the process that produced the second edition of Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do and Vision 2021: Transformations in Leading, Learning, and Community. Further, NAESP’s Platform, representing the beliefs of our members, states that principals should have authority in the decision-making process as it involves personnel assignment and evaluation, expenditure of funds, discipline, curriculum design, program evaluation, and other areas affecting the principal’s leadership role. NAESP believes that as the primary instructional leaders in their schools, principals must have full decision-making authority. In guiding NAESP’s Platform positions, our members are standing together in demanding the authority and autonomy for principals that matches the level of responsibility they have been given to transform our nation’s schools.

Working the System

Findings of a recent study by the American Institute for Research and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute reveal that principals feel their lack of authority is greatest in making personnel decisions. Interestingly, the study also reveals that longer-serving principals feel they have the ability to bargain for greater authority by using unconventional channels. Stated more bluntly, principals want and need more control, but have settled for “working the system” to achieve high levels of student learning. Principals are under immense pressure to lead their schools in ways that produce the very best outcomes for the students they serve, and the burden of unnecessary bureaucratic limitations makes it even more challenging for principals to keep the promise of providing every child with a world-class education.

Shared Leadership

The most recent research on leadership tells us that principals must have a broad set of knowledge and skills in leading 21st century schools. NAESP’s own research asserts principals also must “increasingly draw upon the skills and expertise of others in the school community to take on leadership tasks.” Some may suppose there is incongruity between the idea of principal autonomy—the view that principals are the authority and have sole responsibility for leading schools—and new leadership skills that welcome collaboration with teachers, staff, and other stakeholders. In actuality, it is precisely because principals are chief instructional leaders that they recognize the need for shared leadership by tapping into expertise of teachers, specialists, support staff, parents, and students at their schools. Effective principals draw upon the talents of everyone in meeting the individualized needs of all students. However, principals’ hands are often tied by bureaucratic realities that inhibit their ability to challenge those who do not measure up to expectations in meeting the needs of children. Thus, the greatest challenge for many principals is meeting the demands of accountability, given the limitations of their authority.

NAESP is ready to renew the leadership movement toward ensuring the right balance of authority, autonomy, and responsibility principals must have to lead schools effectively in meeting the needs of 21st century learners. Our nation’s children are depending on principals to lead the way in providing them with the best possible education!
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**Where Am I Going?**

- **Strategy 1**: Provide students with a clear and understandable vision of the learning target.
- **Strategy 2**: Use examples and models of strong and weak work.

**Where Am I Now?**

- **Strategy 3**: Offer regular descriptive feedback.
- **Strategy 4**: Teach students to self-assess and set goals.

**How Can I Close the Gap?**

- **Strategy 5**: Design lessons to focus on one learning target or aspect of quality at a time.
- **Strategy 6**: Teach students focused revision.
- **Strategy 7**: Engage students in self-reflection and let them keep track of and share their learning.

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