

Taking a Novel Approach to Storytelling

We're all familiar with the saying that every picture tells a story. A different take on this adage is also true: Every story paints a picture. The more powerful the story, the more powerful the picture it paints.

The Principal Story, an independently produced documentary soon to air on PBS and funded by The Wallace Foundation, paints such a picture. This documentary, of which NAESP is a proud partner, chronicles a year in the life of two elementary school principals, both NAESP members: Tresa Dunbar, Henry Nash Elementary School in Chicago, and Kerry Purcell, Harvard Park Elementary School in Springfield, Illinois. By using all of the elements of authentic storytelling—a protagonist (in this case, two heroines), plot, dialogue, scenes, struggle and success, tension and conflict, and crisis and resolution—the filmmakers paint a picture of true leadership at the elementary school level.

As I have reflected on the lessons offered by *The Principal Story* since I watched its premiere at NAESP's 2009 convention, four characteristics of their leadership emerge:

- They each have a bold vision for their low-performing schools that focuses on the possibilities of what could be, not the limitations of what has been, and they persuade others to share and support their vision.
- They are unconditionally engaged in their roles as the chief instructional leader of their schools by making teaching and learning the core purpose of their work, using data to set goals and make decisions, mentoring colleagues, and building and supporting teamwork.
- They are profoundly committed to creating and nurturing learning environments that extend beyond their school building to include parents and families.
- They have the resolve to hold people accountable for their actions and behaviors.

Like all good stories, this one also has an undeniable subtext: The job of being an elementary and middle-level principal is routinely strenuous, complex, demanding, and emotionally draining. The day-to-day tasks can shift at a moment's notice, from supporting a child in crisis to having a candid conversation with a teacher who isn't measuring up to inspiring students and teachers alike by celebrating accomplishments.

It's not a career for the faint-hearted. Elementary and middle-level principals require wisdom, knowledge, courage, and even a bit of audacity. They matter to every child, in



every school and community in the United States every day.

Research tells us that elementary and middle-level principals are the primary catalysts for creating a lasting foundation for learning, driving school and student performance, and shaping the long-term impact of school improvement efforts. Leadership is second only to classroom teaching in determining student success.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who was interviewed for the documentary, summed it up succinctly: "We have no good schools without good principals."

Our nation has tens of thousands of great schools, led by just as many great principals who are heroes in their own schools and of their own stories. The challenge is that too few citizens fully understand that great schools are inextricably linked to great principals. One depends on the other.

How can you use *The Principal Story* to tell your own story? We asked this question during a special session at our recent National Leaders' Conference during which we previewed the documentary with about 150 elementary and middle-level principals. They shared some very innovative thoughts regarding how the documentary can help fellow educators and community members better understand the role of principals. A few of their ideas follow:

- Show the documentary to other educators as a way to inspire them to become principals.
- Build it into staff development sessions and all-staff retreats.
- Make it the focal point of discussions between mentors and protégés, especially teachers.
- Share it with parents and community members during PTA/PTO meetings or back-to-school nights.
- Show it to civic groups.
- Encourage superintendents, school board members, and legislators to watch the documentary when it airs on PBS.
- Share it with deans and faculty of colleges of education.
- Invite members of the media to view it in your building.
- Preview some clips with select groups of students.
- Use it to recruit colleagues to become members of NAESP and your state affiliate.

Of course, these suggestions are placeholders for discussions and viewings that resonate with the culture of your school and community. Great stories—like Tresa's, Kerry's, and yours—need to be told so everyone understands your vital role in the education of our children and the preservation of our democracy. □

The Principal Story will air on many PBS television stations as part of the series POV (Point of View) on Sept. 15. Check your local listings at www.pbs.org/pov. For more information, visit www.wallacefoundation.org/principalstory or NAESP's Web site.

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