I heard a story recently that is likely familiar to every educator in the country. A newly retired principal was describing a school tour he hosted long ago for a local reporter. As they stood in the doorway of a kindergarten class, the reporter asked if he could tell which 5-year-olds would drop out. He wrote the names of two children on a piece of paper, sealed it in an envelope, and tucked it away in his desk intending to open it after the kindergarteners were in high school.

You know how the story ends. A decade later, he unsealed the envelope and read the names. “I got it right,” he told me, “but I wish I hadn’t.” He could tell—after just a few minutes of observation and by applying his knowledge of his community—which 5-year-olds were unlikely to graduate from high school. Although one child who drops out is one too many, imagine how my friend would have felt had he “predicted” that 30 percent to 50 percent of the children in that classroom would drop out. That’s the stark reality for far too many children.

His anecdote actually says more about children who are trapped by economic and social circumstances than it says about his ability to foretell the future or his teachers’ ability to “reach and teach” students. The notion that some children seem predestined to drop out is counterintuitive for educators who wholeheartedly believe that all children can succeed in school, especially now, as we enter the year that marks a full decade into this new century.

Consider the central point of 21st Century Skills, Education, and Competitiveness, a 2008 report from the Partnership for 21st Century Skills. The report says that preparing students, workers, and citizens to “triumph in the global skills race is the central economic competitiveness issue for the next decade.”

Much of this Principal magazine explores what children need to know to understand and contribute to a complicated and interconnected world. While researchers have more questions than answers, one factor is immutable: The 21st century skills and knowledge that our society needs are not limited to middle-class or affluent students. All children, regardless of their personal circumstances, must have an equal opportunity to succeed as individuals and citizens in our rapidly evolving world; all schools, regardless of whether they are labeled as low- or high-performing, must have the same resources to address this national imperative.

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“All Americans, not just an elite few, need 21st century skills that will increase their marketability, employability, and readiness for citizenship,” 21st Century Skills, Education, and Competitiveness states, citing several higher order skills as being essential: thinking critically and analyzing information; solving complex, open-ended problems; being creative and entrepreneurial; communicating and collaborating across borders; and using knowledge and information to create new opportunities.

How to accomplish this ambitious agenda? The report suggests that “the nation needs an ‘NCLB-plus’ agenda that infuses 21st century skills into core academic subjects. This is not an either/or agenda: Students can master 21st century skills while they learn reading, mathematics, science, writing, and other school subjects.”

Advancing this mandate hinges on our ability to work across sectors, from pre-K centers to post-graduate classrooms. This goal is central to the new initiative of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) that raises the bar for teacher education programs nationwide—one of the most significant revisions of teacher education requirements in a decade.

As a long-time NCATE member, NAESP signed on early and enthusiastically to this effort. Research says that the two most important factors in children’s academic achievements are highly trained classroom teachers and effective principals who are instructional leaders. Ensuring a continuum of success from teacher preparation to the principalship also aligns with NAESP’s Leading Learning Communities standards, published in 2008 in a book of the same name. NAESP’s standards and NCATE’s initiative recognize that 21st century learning can only occur when effective principals support excellent teachers.

Elementary schools are initial learning portals to the 21st century, providing the skills and knowledge students need to succeed in a world most adults can barely imagine. In this endeavor, there is no substitute for accomplished principals who have access to ongoing professional development. We need every principal, school, and student to succeed, and they need every legislator, parent, and advocate to support, challenge, and applaud them. By working together, we can identify those most at risk for dropping out and take bold actions to prevent it. The emerging 21st century paradigm for teaching and learning offers new hope for solving these and other chronic challenges.
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