Power
Almost every working day for 24 years, I pulled into a parking space marked “Principal” and walked into a school I treasured and felt honored to serve. In the pre-bell clamor of ringing telephones, impromptu conversations with teachers and parents, and “on-the-fly” schedule changes, I always kept one ear tuned to catch the best sound of the day—the first bus rolling up to the school’s front door. More days than not, I’d make time to greet the kids as they tumbled into school—noisy, animated, and eager to begin their learning day. And more days than not, I’d feel equal parts energized, optimistic, and daunted by the responsibility facing me. What could I do that day to prepare those youngsters for their own future, one I could scarcely imagine?

It’s a weighty question, and one principals ask themselves every day. It’s also a question that implies influence, and rightly so. Principals are powerful: They 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.

Yet few of the principals I know would characterize themselves as powerful. Rather, they’re self-effacing, adaptable, pragmatic, and quick to share credit and shoulder the blame. They’re masters of absorbing, filtering, and modifying the agendas of others (chiefly teachers, superintendents, boards, and parents)—often at the expense of their own—to piece together a blended plan that benefits their students. More important, principals are mindful that they do more than merely “go to work.” The research, the pundits, the news media, and the policymakers say the same thing: The nation requires excellent schools, and excellent schools require effective principals.

Today, the principalship stands out in bold relief against a complex backdrop—a puzzle comprised of often conflicting federal guidelines and state requirements, skimpy funds to cover fat mandates, simplistic measurements for multifaceted goals, a chorus of criticism and appreciation, and a world that is changing at breakneck speed.

It’s against this backdrop that the National Association of Elementary School Principals developed a long-term, national, comprehensive initiative called the Power of the Principal. Its goals are straightforward:

- Raise the national profile of principals as educational and civic leaders who are committed to the academic, social, and emotional success of all children.
- Highlight pre-K-8 principals as foremost educational leaders who are integral to the success of schools and communities and key to ensuring educational opportunity for all children.
- Send a consistent, strong message to federal and state legislators and policymakers that principals are essential to the nation’s school improvement agenda and, as such, they require the authority, autonomy, and responsibility to lead their schools.
- Combat the negative image of public schools held in some quarters with the accurate, positive news that most public schools are high-quality teaching and learning communities.
Tell the stories of principals as “Sher¬pans” to the 21st century, as developers of future work forces, as guardians of kids, and as keepers of the American Dream, which depends on an educated citizenry and a prosperous society. Ensure that the voice of principals is heard in the national discourse on public education reform.

NAESP is driving this strategy along two parallel tracks: advocacy and awareness.

Advocacy for Principals
NAESP has always been the “eyes and ears” of K-8 principals in Washington, D.C., but that’s not enough in this high-stakes environment. We’re rolling out an aggressive advocacy agenda on Capitol Hill and with the Obama administration and, in the process, building strong working relationships in the run-up to the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the comprehensive authorizing bill for education. A summary of key activities follows, but please note that much will have transpired since this article was written. You can find up-to-date reports on NAESP’s Web site.

Legislation. NAESP played an important role in the working group that developed the most significant federal policy reform to date in literacy instruction. The Association helped create the Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation, or the LEARN Act, which combines the most effective provisions from existing legislation (Striving Readers, Reading First, and Early Reading First) into a new, comprehensive measure that addresses literacy education from early childhood through adolescence. Specifically, NAESP took the lead on developing policy for grades K-3 and on the role of the principal in all elements of the proposed policy. LEARN was introduced in the House and Senate in November; we expect that all or portions of it will be included in the ESEA reauthorization in the spring.

The Association reached another milestone when we provided language to support an increase in funding for professional development for principals in a bill that will be folded into ESEA this spring. The language for the bill is based on the standards from Leading Learning Communities, NAESP’s standards document that describes what elementary principals should know and be able to do.

In other funding-related legislative activity, NAESP provided data and feedback to the Department of Education to bolster President Obama’s recommended increase to the School Leadership Program. The proposed revisions expand professional development opportunities related to early childhood education via a competitive grant process that districts would apply for in conjunction with a nonprofit organiza-
tion and/or a college or university. The next step: NAESP is currently working with policymakers to get the legislation passed.

**Regulations and Guidelines.** Last summer, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan released two proposals to advance the Obama education agenda—Race to the Top (RTTT) and the School Improvement Grants (SIG) fund. RTTT, part of the stimulus funds, is designed to provide states with incentives to implement reform across four “assurance” areas: standards and assessments, teacher effectiveness and equity in teacher distribution, collecting and using data, and support for struggling schools. While NAESP identified ideas we support, we also pointedly addressed areas of disagreement.

Our comments emphatically stated that principals need time, tools, and talent to implement and sustain reform efforts, and that metrics of student, school, and educator effectiveness cannot be narrowly based on standardized test scores. Initial grants were released in January to state education departments, which will allocate funds to districts that meet all four assurance areas and a host of other requirements states set. Will the funds trickle down to schools? We believe that’s an open question. Let us know if your school received RTTT funds and how you’re spending them.

The long-established SIG program has been redesigned by the department to allocate funding to improve the lowest performing schools nationwide. As a condition of receiving SIG funds, schools would be required to implement one of four reform models, two of which would require the dismissal of the existing principal and two of which would likely result in the dismissal of the existing principal. NAESP strenuously objected to the concept of automatic dismissal of the principal without first granting such individuals the necessary authority and autonomy to implement a reform plan. NAESP Executive Director Gail Connelly called this strategy the “ready, fire, aim” approach in her column in the November 2009 issue of Communicator. (Read the column at [www.naesp.org](http://www.naesp.org).) Despite our strong differences on these issues, we strive to state our disagreement respectfully, knowing that it’s in the best interest of the 60,000 elementary principals nationwide that NAESP remains a partner in these discussions. We are at the table on your behalf, and we must remain at the table. Only then can we ensure that your voice is heard in these debates.

**Awareness About Principals**

We’ve greatly expanded our outreach to national and regional media representatives, opinion leaders, and others to strengthen their understanding of the vitally important work principals do every day.

---

**Seeking Visionary School Leaders for DC Public Schools**

DC Public Schools is undertaking an exciting reform effort to ensure the highest quality education for our students.

We are looking for talented school leaders to transform DC Public Schools into a district of excellence.

**Apply Now**

**Principal and Assistant Principal positions for school year 2010-2011**

dcps.dc.gov/leaddc
“We have only begun to tap the potential of elementary and middle-level principals as a national, positive force for children.”

Media Calls. We’ve fielded media calls from a range of national media outlets and online news sources—The New York Times, USA Today, Bloomberg News, Education Week, Education Daily, The Boston Globe, the Harvard Education Letter, Cox TV, education.com, and MarketWatch .com, just to name a few—on such topics as turnaround schools, the H1N1 virus, principal recruitment strategies, the definition of effective leadership, and the disbursement of RTTT funds.

Social Networking. President Diane Cargile launched a blog called “Where’s Diane?” and has posted several entries that report on her travels on behalf of principals. These entries are housed in NAESP’s general blog, the Principals’ Office. NAESP also has launched Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter accounts, where friends, followers, and members can connect with one another and share ideas and comments on elementary and middle-level education.

NAESP Radio. Executive Director Gail Connelly hosts a monthly Web-based interview with education’s newsmakers in brief, insightful conversations that focus on critical or newsworthy aspects of the principalship. Topics covered include instructional leadership, preparing for the H1N1 virus, the impact of poverty on learning, and creating dynamic change in schools.

The Principal Story. NAESP’s outreach campaign to support this documentary consisted of several elements. We alerted members about the documentary, suggested ways they can use the film to tell their own stories, and created a dedicated Web page that features information about the documentary, tips on how to use it to generate public confidence, and links to other resources.

NAESP News. Hundreds of newspapers have published NAESP press releases on a variety of topics, including the National Distinguished Principals, the National Leaders’ Conference, Share the Dream grant recipients, and other news that highlights principals and their accomplishments.
These and many other efforts are all designed to reinforce the Power of the Principal. You are critical to our success. We will be calling upon you to participate in legislative efforts, monitor issues affecting our field, and provide ongoing feedback on the role NAESP should play. We have only begun to tap the potential of elementary and middle-level principals as a national, positive force for children, but we’re already seeing the enormous potential to create constructive, sustainable change.

Michael L. Schooley is deputy executive director of NAESP. His e-mail address is mschooley@naesp.org.