Though research tells us that principals are key in raising student achievement, and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has often said, “We have no good schools without good principals,” principals remain unsung heroes for the nation’s children. Because they work on the front lines of education—student by student and class by class—to lead schools in preparing students for successful lives, it’s possible to miss the entire significance of the principalship. To shine a light on the diverse and influential roles that principals play at their schools and in their communities, Principal magazine recently asked practicing principals to reflect on what they believe are the most powerful aspects of their jobs.
Principals have the power to help change lives. Veteran school leaders reflect on their most influential roles.
The respondents are all veteran school leaders who, like principal Debo-rah Ayers-Geist says, made the decision to become a principal because “I knew I would have the power to impact the lives of thousands of children.” In addition to Ayers-Geist, principal of Turner Elementary School in Kansas City, Kansas, the featured principals share her position of using power not “as something to rule over people,” but as a “vision to bring about changes that I saw were needed for our children.”

The remainder of the responses focus on principals using their voices to advocate for issues important to children and schools, making sure that schools educate the whole child, providing stellar instructional leadership, and leveraging relationships to benefit student achievement.

**Advocate for children.** As respected community members, principals are charged with being a voice for students and advocating at the local, state, and national levels for funding and policies that will ensure equitable access to high-quality education for all students.

The power of the principal is a humbling feeling, with the knowledge that our actions can reach and affect so many lives each year. It comes with limitless opportunities to reach out and make a difference and to effect change for children and for our communities. But power comes with the responsibility to ensure that our voices are heard. With this position comes the additional responsibility to speak out, challenge the status quo, and to be a voice for the whole child and their needs. Together, we have the power to be the voice of our children and our families in challenging times.

When asked to comment on the power of the principal, one naturally assumes that principals realize that they have a powerful presence not only in their school buildings, but in the community, throughout their states, and across the nation. Too many times principals will say: “I’m only a principal.” “I’m from a small school in the middle of nowhere,” or “Why would they want to hear from me?” Too many principals sell themselves short on the importance community members, local office holders, and state and national politicians attach to the local school principal.

Think about it: You are in daily contact with 500 children, 70 staff members, 1,000 parents, and the community in which you live, which adds up to at least 1,070 direct or indirect voters. When you call your legislators, they will listen. If they don’t, let them know that your parent community will be disappointed that they wouldn’t listen to their principal’s thoughts regarding their children’s education. Try it sometime; you will quickly find out about the power of the principal.

**Educate the whole child.** Schools are charged with addressing each child as a total person—as a whole child—with unique needs and circumstances that go beyond academics. Principals are committed to the academic and social/emotional success of children.

Hanging over my door is a sign that reads “Kids Are My Business.” This serves as a daily reminder that the power and importance of my job is to make sure kids are being taken care of physically, emotionally, and educationally.

The role of the principal in a school of 800 kids can be daunting. I constantly gauge whether my kids are learning and their teachers are happy and establishing classrooms to foster quality learning opportunities, if we have the supplies, equipment, and staff that will enhance student achievement, and if there are changes that need to be made to make life and learning better for the kids.

As I spend time in classrooms, in hallways, in lunchrooms, and on playgrounds, I try to pay particular attention to the students. I want to see them engaged in learning activities that are motivating and challenging. I want to see them happy as they interact with
Thanks so much for helping my son improve his math skills this semester. You’ve helped make him a much more confident student.

You’re the best teacher I’ve ever had. I actually look forward to coming to class!

Your support for our professional development project has meant a great deal to the entire faculty. As principal, I have the opportunity of working with many different people. You’re one in a million! Thanks!

Your hours of dedication to the PTA this year has made us all much more aware of our school’s needs and opportunities. Your input has been invaluable.

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other students. I want to see that they are being nurtured by caring staff members. I want to see them being challenged on an appropriate level, regardless of their abilities. I want them to feel successful in every way possible.

Student success doesn’t come easy. In this time of high-stakes expectations and budget-cutting measures, principals must be cautious in the allocation of supplies, equipment, and time. They must hire quality staff and keep them motivated for kids. They must be willing to deal with difficult problems. They must hold staff members accountable for their actions and at the same time create a positive and fun working environment. Above all, they must hold children accountable for learning and behavior. These tasks can only be accomplished through high levels of collaboration and cooperation between the principal, staff members, students, and parents.

My ultimate goal each day as I walk out of my office on my way home is to look at that sign and be able to say, “The kids were well taken care of today!” And tomorrow we start all over again.

Dwight Liddiard, Principal
East Meadows Elementary School
Spanish Fork, Utah

Provide instructional leadership.
Principals have the vision, courage, wisdom, and professional knowledge to lead learning communities that create opportunities for all children to achieve their highest potential. They ensure all children have a meaningful and relevant foundation for learning.

One of the most important roles a principal has is to provide a quality instructional leader in each classroom. Also, principals empower teachers by sharing data, guiding its use, and collaborating with teachers so they can form a vision of their students’ present progress as well as a plan under their instructional leadership for future growth. Principals provide a mechanism for continuous feedback and collaboration in and across grade levels so that, for example, the kindergarten teacher can share the importance of her curriculum to fifth-grade teachers.

Finally, principals provide instructional leadership by providing resources that teachers need to make the greatest impact on student learning.

Diane Cargile, Principal
Rio Grande Elementary School
Terre Haute, Indiana

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–Kris Wells, Keshena Primary School, Keshena, WI

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also work with staff members to develop their skills and talents, all for the betterment of children.

David P. Cobb, Principal
Lyndon Town School
Lyndonville, Vermont

Build relationships. As principals’ roles grow more complex, they are charged with creating a culture of collaboration and actively engaging the community to create shared responsibility for student performance.

Principals must be able to develop appropriate relationships; in other words, they have and use “power sources.” One power source is teachers, as we depend upon them to achieve academic success with students for whom we are accountable. Another power source is parents, who we depend on to send students to school who are well rested, in good health, and ready to learn. A third power source is professional organizations such as local, state, and national affiliations, which provide principals with current educational research, policy mandates, and current school law.

Principals have power, and they must use it to provide quality, comprehensive education to students, helping them to overcome everyday obstacles through quality instruction and academic success.

Fidelia Sturdivant, Principal
Wahlstrom Early Childhood Academy
East Orange, New Jersey

What are your views about a principal’s power? Read other responses to this question and share your thoughts with your colleagues by going to the Principals’ Office at http://naesp.typepad.com and clicking on “Power of the Principal.”