



Forget What You Know About Conferences

The 2017 National Principals Conference will be like no other.

By Joan Auchter and Deborah Tyler

Think back to “Little House on the Prairie,” when student learning took place in a one-room school. All the children were together and they learned in one culture and in one environment.

But as communities got bigger, we started separating from elementary to junior high to high schools. Now, we look at learning in developmental stages by separating pre-K to grade 3, grades 4 to 8, and grades 9 through 12. And what’s more, most schools have a different culture and different curriculum. So when students finish one school they migrate to the next level, and it’s a big transition.

The 2017 National Principals Conference, hosted by NAESP and NASSP, is all about addressing those student transitions and going back to that one-room school perspective, when pre-K through grade 12 leaders are all in the same place, able to hear the same things, and build those bridges again. Here’s what sparked the idea for our joint conference.

How It All Began

The role of school leader today is much more complex than it was previously, because rather than just operating systems, it’s more about relationships. It’s about people—and learning how to connect with those people—whether it’s your staff, your students, your parents, or your broader community. You’re creating a shared environment and culture for all to embrace.

When thinking about how students move through the school system, we want principals in high schools to understand and celebrate that they’re connected to that principal in the elementary, middle, and pre-K schools, and principals in pre-K to grade 3 schools to understand they are the underpinning to their students’ middle and high school experiences.

We, as educators, have known for some time that the K-12 continuum is very important. So when we started dreaming the dream of this conference, we talked about the importance of beginning with the end in mind. There is nothing more rewarding than to walk into a school and see the high school principal interacting with his future students at the elementary level. And further, there is nothing more moving than to see the elementary principal on the high school graduation stage shaking the hands of those students who began their education journeys in that principal’s school.

It’s important to acknowledge that while the developmental ages of the students are

School leaders share the same goals for student success from pre-K through high school. When they come together for the first-ever joint national conference, something very powerful will happen: collaboration, synergy, and inspiration will soar. NAESP has joined the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) to host the 2017 National Principals Conference, July 9-11 in Philadelphia. Here, you will get a behind-the-scenes glimpse into the innovation and planning underway for this landmark event, designed to build transition bridges in order to shape the trajectory for student success.

different, the context in which they’re learning is different, and the content they’re learning is different, learning is learning. Deep and critical thinking, citizenship, and self-efficacy are necessary at all levels. At the end of the day, all children still have the same needs—social, emotional, physical, and intellectual needs.

The National Principals Conference brings great leaders across all levels together to connect, develop, and succeed in collectively leading great schools. It’s important to note that a committee of 15 highly recognized school leaders across the continuum—five elementary, five middle, and five high school principals—helped shape the vision, focus, and delivery of this innovative conference.

What You Will Learn

Principals often feel isolated in their schools. Conferences are a great opportunity to step out of the office and interact with fellow school leaders experiencing similar issues. However, often conferences are “sit and get” experiences. The experts are there. You come and listen. You leave and you have this “bag of knowledge.” However, some of the best professional development is just “doing it.” It’s seeing something firsthand and recognizing the importance of it, and also having the opportunity to practice it and understand the tools needed to go back and implement it.



NATIONAL PRINCIPALS 2017 CONFERENCE

The whole philosophy of the National Principals Conference is that everything we're doing is job-embedded. Attendees' practice should be changed when they leave because they'll actually have gone through integrated, hands-on experiences. They will have had the time and space to apply learning with each other, and will leave with a way to continue that learning and the connections after the conference.

It may sound cliché, but it really does take a village when it comes to education—understanding that we're very interdependent upon each other for student success, innovation, and taking those risks. It's so important to take those risks and “come out of the box” to do great things in schools, which can help change the mindset of the very traditional route we've been on where we've been siloed as elementary, middle, and high schools.

One of the best ways to break silos and isolation is through communicating with each other. So we have been very diligent in creating spaces within this conference for principals to have that opportunity. Attendees will be able to really look out across that K-12 continuum and see the value that they have in each other.

How It Will Be Different

The dream is big—you really need to come to this conference with an open mind. We're changing the whole delivery of the conference—it will be more of an applied learning design.

You start at the top with a thought leader. Then you go to the next level, where you have practitioner experts, which would be concurrent sessions where those people with programs or solutions are actually demonstrating them. Then the next layer is facilitated conversations, sometimes called “Edcamps” or “unconferences,” where anything in that strand will be discussed in that room and the attendees select the topics. An additional layer of learning is the hack-a-thon, where you pose a question and fellow practitioners will be around the table to help you find a solution.

For principals who have teachers who are saying, “I learned about unconferencing at my last conference. How can we do that in our school?” we're not only letting principals experience it, but we're giving them the tools and training they need to take back and apply in their home settings.

We've also asked our exhibitors to make their booths participatory rather than just handing out a piece of paper—we want to see how these products work in action with actual teachers and students. Floor areas will be planned around the strands of the conference. Various learning labs will be going on throughout the conference. And we're going to create learning spaces where principals will see classrooms coming to life with actual students and teachers inside.

We want this to be a very different experience for principals, more so than they've ever had before. We're upending the whole conference model by meeting in the hallways, at the tables, and at thematic social events where principals can continue conversations about topics after hours in different venues.

How the Learning Is Organized

We've structured the conference into four strands, each with its own corresponding thought leaders and practitioner experts, so that attendees can create a conference experience tailor-made for them. The four strands at the National Principals Conference include:

1. Increasing Professional Capacity. It is very important for school leaders to understand that they not only have to increase the professional capacity of their teachers, but that they also have to increase the professional capacity within themselves. This is an opportunity for them to take control of their own professional destiny.