

Celebrating 100 Years of NAESP

BY L. EARL FRANKS, ED.D., CAE



Advocating for principals. Fostering school leadership. Supporting children. These are the core principles NAESP was founded on 100 years ago, when 51 elementary school principals formally established the then-Department of Elementary School Principals under the National Education Association. Our mission hasn't changed since 1921, but the profession certainly has.

The role of principal has expanded greatly from managerial to instructional leadership. Since March 2020, adaptive school leadership has become even more important to contend with the COVID-19 pandemic and its unprecedented school closings. As it has done for a century, NAESP sprang into action when our principals needed us most. With the NAESP National Coronavirus Task Force, a principal-led advisory board, we learned what principals needed the most to do their jobs well amid a pandemic and supplied them with the latest guidance, best practices, and professional resources to meet those needs.

I have benefited personally from these resources as a former pre-K-12 principal, an NAESP member, and a state affiliate executive director before stepping into my current role as NAESP executive director. One value that's often overlooked but enormously helpful, enjoyable, and gratifying is the association's networking opportunities. The many people from every region and state I have met, learned from, and formed lifelong friendships with are hallmarks of the NAESP membership experience. These special relationships served as a lifeline for me during my tenure as a school leader and continue to provide support in my role as executive director.

I've also seen firsthand that the priorities in schools have changed, too. Topping the list are a focus on social-emotional learning and mental health, a renewed effort to support equity in the classroom, and navigating rapidly advancing technology—now more than ever because of the pandemic, which has shifted the landscape of learning in ways that will affect education for years to come.

These priorities aren't just for students. Ensuring that everyone in the pipeline—teachers, assistant principals, and new and seasoned principals—is set up for success is key to enhancing education for all students for years to come. Professional learning for principals is fundamental in achieving this goal.

Recently, NAESP partnered with the Learning Policy Institute to survey elementary school principals on their access to professional learning opportunities. While most reported access to professional development content, far fewer said they were able to participate in “authentic” learning opportunities. They also said they wanted more professional development content related to supporting whole-child education and in leading equitable schools.

NAESP has always taken great pride in nurturing a peer-to-peer network that enhances principals' skills, no matter their career stage. As the principalship has shifted, so has NAESP. We continue to innovate to meet the needs of today's school leaders. The new, peer-led NAESP Centers for Advancing Leadership offers leadership development and networking opportunities with a focus on innovation, women in leadership, diversity in leadership, and middle-level leadership.

The NAESP National Task Force on Race and Equity—also principal-led—is developing tools principals can use to strengthen themselves as leaders of equity, promote school assessment and action planning, and push for an equity-aligned policy and advocacy agenda. Launching a customized implicit bias association test for NAESP members is just the start.

All year long, NAESP will be celebrating its rich history, with a special celebration at the 2021 NAESP Pre-K-8 Principals Conference in Chicago in July. Join us by tweeting your favorite moments as members of NAESP with the hashtag #ACenturyOfNAESP, and let us know where you hope to see NAESP go as we move forward—together—to support educators, their schools, and their students. ●

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