

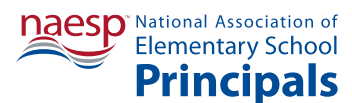
Leaders We Need Now Series Executive Summary:

What we learned from elementary school principals about changes to schools and the profession emerging from 2020–2021

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Leaders We Need Now is a three-part series of research briefs that describe principals' perspectives on the future of schooling



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Executive Summary

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and NAESP Foundation asked researchers from the American Institutes for Research® (AIR®) to conduct focus groups with elementary school principals about school and professional changes occurring through the school years that spanned from March 2020 to June 2021, a time when most schools experienced significant crises. These included the global COVID-19 pandemic, a national reckoning with racial and social injustice, a divisive election cycle, and a multitude of severe weather events. NAESP wanted to know how schools and the profession were changing from the perspective of principals and what policy supports principals believed were necessary to support schools. AIR conducted 36 focus groups with 188 principals—a national, geographically distributed sample of NAESP membership—from 43 states from April to June 2021.

Three policy briefs have been written to summarize findings from the qualitative study. This document summarizes the findings presented in the three briefs.

Brief 1: Leaders in the Tumult: School Innovations and New Perspectives From a Year Interrupted

Principals recount how their schools changed in 2020–2021, speculate about which changes might endure, and identify new challenges associated with the changes.

What we learned

School routines and relationships were upended in 2020–2021, and principals managed myriad changes, showing resilience through hardship. Principals reported high stress and low educator morale, and many predicted educator shortages will follow.

Principals noted that the following school changes could be maintained long after 2020–2021:

- ◆ Scaled use of remote instructional technology to supplement and extend learning;
- ◆ Flexible staffing practices to retain staff, particularly those with specialized skills;
- ◆ Reengineered student flow procedures to support student safety and learning; and
- ◆ Deepened school and community partnerships to support whole child development.

The principals expressed concerns about the future of schooling and the educator workforce, while also recognizing that societal changes will prompt organizational learning in schools. The principals noted concerns about

- ◆ The capacity of schools to address mental health and socioeconomic issues facing families and communities that may inhibit student learning;
- ◆ Adequately supporting students with special needs, including those who were learning online in 2020–2021;
- ◆ The need to address differences in digital access in communities;
- ◆ Meaningfully addressing social justice and political differences in an effort to heal schools and communities;
- ◆ Creating flexible and inclusive educator workplaces to retain teachers;

- ◆ Hiring and retaining technology specialists, nurses, and social workers in schools; and
- ◆ Renewing the educator workforce, particularly principal pipelines, given low educator morale and exhaustion from 2020–2021.

Brief 2: Evolution of the Principalship: Leaders Explain How the Profession Is Changing Through a Most Difficult Year

Principals describe how the events of 2020–2021 shaped the priorities of their profession and what the principalship may look like in the future.

What we learned

Principals reported working about the same amount of hours (average 60.5 per week) in 2020–2021 as they did before 2020, but what they spent their time on shifted.

The *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders*, which have been adopted by a majority of states, guided conversations about changes in the work priorities and responsibilities of principals. A majority of the principals reported spending more time on *operations and management, providing a community of care for students, professional community for teachers and staff, and meaningful engagement of families*. The principals' work in these categories aimed to provide continuity of services through a chaotic academic year.

A majority of principals reported spending less time on *curriculum, instruction and assessment, equity and cultural responsiveness, school improvement, and professional capacity* in 2021–2022. Many of the principals recognized the need to rethink and restart the work of instructional leaders, with equity at its center.

Principals also said that their responsibilities expanded beyond the areas of their work described by the standards. Many principals said that their new job descriptions included

- ◆ Crisis management, which includes making decisions in uncertain, ambiguous situations under stress, and
- ◆ Communicating effectively in highly politicized local communities, including balancing vocal and ardent groups.

Principals felt underprepared and undersupported to manage these new priorities and are seeking more training, support, and staff to improve in these areas.

Most principals felt underprepared and undersupported to lead schools through this most difficult time. The principals said that they sought

- ◆ To reconfigure their responsibilities and, possibly, redistribute their responsibilities to assistant principals or other leaders;
- ◆ Support to meaningfully address equity in their personal practices in school and in leadership processes in school;
- ◆ Professional development for their roles, such as providing social-emotional support to students and educators who have experienced trauma, crisis management training and engagement with community-wide crisis management teams, and social media management.

Brief 3: Principals on Policy: What Educational Leaders Seek Through Policy

Principals specify what their schools need from policymakers as they continue to grapple with the events of 2020 and early 2021.

What we learned

Principals want policymakers to (a) engage their professional expertise prior to making policies and (b) take current school contexts into account. The principals wanted policymakers to know that they are willing to lend their professional expertise when formulating policies to help heal communities.

Principals' on-the-ground, 24/7 experiences leading schools through the events of 2020–2021 led them to be clear about what their schools need now from policymakers. Principals need policymakers to

- ◆ **Invest in principal and teacher workforce incentives and initiatives.** Principals told us that they expect higher educator turnover in years to come because of job stress, new opportunities, and retirements in 2020–2021. Principals encouraged policymakers to (a) strengthen principal pipelines by increasing financial incentives to enter the profession and (b) support and recognize the need for specialized training.
- ◆ **Reformulate school accountability metrics to capture how well schools are supporting the whole child.** The national response to the global pandemic highlighted schools' roles in student academic and social-emotional development, physical health, educational equity, and community well-being.
- ◆ **Provide more funding for in-school mental and physical health supports.** Many schools do not have access to desperately needed healthcare providers, school counselors, school psychologists, and school social workers. Principals encouraged legislators to incentivize pay for health workers or pursue other avenues to adequately staff schools to meet the growing needs of students.
- ◆ **Increase access to professional learning and networked supports.** Principals wanted access to (a) online professional development and mentoring/coaching support or (b) principal networks to exchange knowledge and improve practices through Title I and II funding.

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