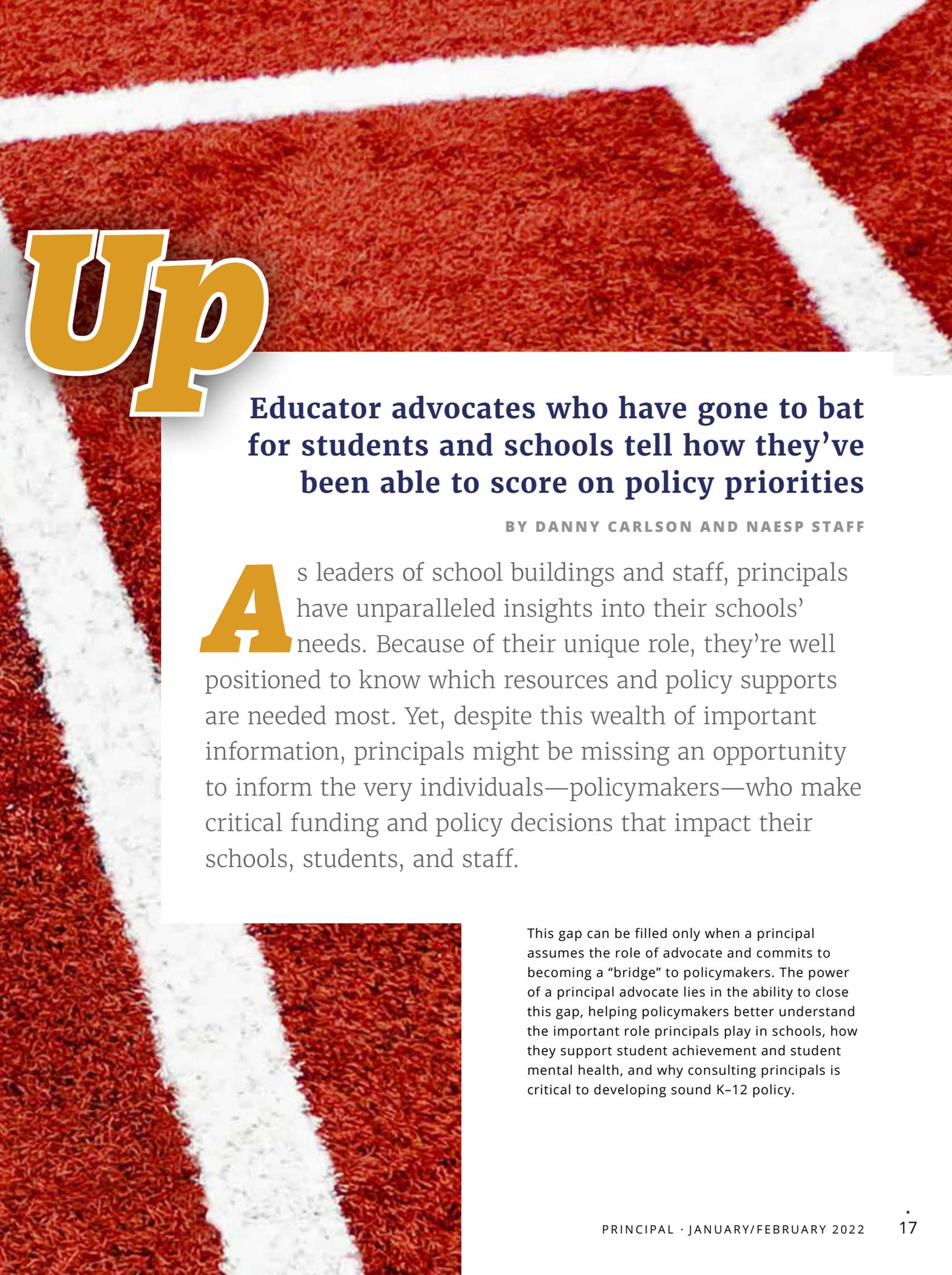


Stepping to the Plate



A background of red and white stripes, resembling a baseball field, with the stripes running diagonally from the top-left to the bottom-right.

Up

Educator advocates who have gone to bat for students and schools tell how they've been able to score on policy priorities

BY DANNY CARLSON AND NAESP STAFF

As leaders of school buildings and staff, principals have unparalleled insights into their schools' needs. Because of their unique role, they're well positioned to know which resources and policy supports are needed most. Yet, despite this wealth of important information, principals might be missing an opportunity to inform the very individuals—policymakers—who make critical funding and policy decisions that impact their schools, students, and staff.

This gap can be filled only when a principal assumes the role of advocate and commits to becoming a “bridge” to policymakers. The power of a principal advocate lies in the ability to close this gap, helping policymakers better understand the important role principals play in schools, how they support student achievement and student mental health, and why consulting principals is critical to developing sound K-12 policy.

Principals might not always fully appreciate how favorably they're viewed by the public and what this means for their ability to sway policy decisions. According to the Pew Research Center, Americans trust K-12 principals more than other authority figures to be caring, to provide fair and accurate information, and to handle resources responsibly.

The coronavirus pandemic has forever changed the principalship, but a principal's role as the nexus of stakeholders in the K-12 ecosystem has endured and only intensified the urgency for principals to step up as advocates for their schools.

Principal magazine asked several successful advocates how they were able to maximize their influence on behalf of students, educators, and schools. Here's what they said:

“My advice is to center your advocacy on the real needs of your students and families.”
—Lyn Marsilio

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH LEGISLATORS



Allyson Apsey, Quincy Elementary, Zeeland, Michigan

Apsey formed relationships with policymakers in order to better represent education in upcoming bills and appropriations. State legislators have shadowed Apsey when school is in session to get a glimpse of what things are really like on the ground, and she and her colleagues exchange calls with lawmakers regularly to share advice.

What did you hope to accomplish with your advocacy efforts?

Our first goal is to form relationships with legislators so they are comfortable turning to us for guidance on legislation. It's important to remember that they are people and public servants—just like educators. They want to help us, and forming relationships with state and national senators and representatives allows practicing principals to share our story with people who make decisions that impact our work.

How did you define your effectiveness or fine-tune your strategies?

The more phone calls and meetings I had, the more comfortable I became. I got familiar with the language of legislation, so I felt like I could hold my own in a conversation. I still feel really smart when I use those big words. But those big words mean big things for our students, and they deserve to be represented by their principals in their state capitals and in D.C.

How has your advocacy impacted the school community?

Local legislators have visited our school and met with students in the state capital. Students were excited to meet local leaders, and they were able to learn about the branches of government in a hands-on way. The legislators get to see the issues facing our schools firsthand. It is a win-win.

What advice can you offer to other educators who might want to do something similar?

It's really easy to find out who your local legislators are [and access] their contact information. Commit to making a phone call or two to introduce yourself and share issues that are impacting students right now. Invite your legislators to tour the school or read to students. Forming a relationship is the first step in advocating for our students.

ACCESS FOR ENGLISH LEARNERS



**Lyn Marsilio, Yorkshire Elementary,
Manassas, Virginia**

Marsilio's advocacy centers around helping English learners and low-income families access resources they might not otherwise get. While she doesn't always see results immediately, she says, it's important to show decision-makers the potential impacts of their actions. "There is such a difference between seeing decisions on paper and seeing what actually happens in the school building," Marsilio says.

What did you hope to accomplish with your advocacy efforts?

I hope to ensure voices that aren't typically heard have the ability to be heard. We host annual resource fairs to make sure parents have access to needed resources. I advocate through our community partners to help families learn how to advocate in our U.S. school systems, and I advocate with the central office to make sure our students' needs are not forgotten.

How did you get started, and what steps or actions were involved?

I spent time listening to stakeholders. I also found my footing about how and when to be vocal about the needs of our community. I spoke with more experienced principals and my mentor, and invested in professional reading such as *Principal* magazine to help me learn the craft.

How did you define your effectiveness or fine-tune your strategies?

I rely on my team. My parent liaison, school counselors, and school social worker help me stay grounded in what our students and families actually need [and] advocate for the right things. For instance, during the first year of the pandemic, our district worked out a deal with Comcast to get low-cost Wi-Fi for families so students could attend school virtually. [Then] my parent liaison found out that many of our families rent out rooms or floors in houses and don't have access to Comcast. As a result, I worked with our IT department to get hotspots instead. Had my parent liaison not kept me aware of students' real needs, I wouldn't have known to advocate for them.

What advice can you offer to other educators who might want to do something similar?

My advice is to center your advocacy on the real needs of your students and families. Build a team that will help you make good decisions and tell you what you need to advocate for, not just what you think you need. Don't be afraid to continue learning and growing as a leader—it will only make you a better advocate for your students and families.

SECURE FEDERAL FUNDING



**Thomas Payton, Roanoke Avenue
Elementary School, Riverhead, New York**

Having helped his district achieve "big wins" in funding under the American Rescue Plan, Payton is now turning his attention to its allocation. "Funding is the most competitive arena," he says. "As principals, we know our schools and communities best and know where specific funding will have the greatest impact."

What did you hope to accomplish with your advocacy efforts?

Usually, the main ask is always more funding, especially at the federal and state levels. Local advocacy tends to be a more specific ask—for example, finding out how testing can/should be used for rating teachers and principals, or looking at local education to provide equitable access for underserved communities.

How did you get started, and what steps or actions were involved?

I became the New York State Representative for NAESP. Once I had advocated on Capitol Hill, it was easy to take those same steps and apply them to the state level, which led to direct impacts on my school community.

How has your advocacy impacted the school community?

[Through advocacy,] legislators get to know you and your school, especially when they connect to your story. This puts a light on your community when they are discussing a bill that impacts education. Inviting legislators to your school is also an excellent strategy; that is where the impact is really felt. Legislators who visit tend to use your community as an example in bills you would like to see implemented.

What advice can you offer to other educators who might want to do something similar?

If you would like to become an advocate for your school, know that as principal, you already are one. Tell your story—drive that narrative. Also, become involved in your state association and NAESP. Both give you a solid platform and are excellent vehicles to drive your message.

Sharing Strategies

NAESP held a Twitter chat in October 2021 to ask principals about their advocacy priorities and what strategies have proven effective in advancing their goals. Here's what participants said:

What does advocacy for schools and the principal profession mean to you?

- I think [advocacy is] being able to shine a light on all of the great work that is going on in schools and being able to lead and support them through the good and the bad. —*Stacy Lemelin (@StacyLemelin)*
- Advocacy means supporting educators, students, and other admins. It means speaking up for public education, developing a PLN, and joining like-minded people. —*Heather Stukey (@PrincipalStukey)*

Which priorities do you focus on when advocating for your school?

- I prioritize needs based on community surveys and staff input. I reflect on the areas where we are having the most difficulty to determine how I can leverage my voice. —*Dr. Ryan Daniel (@HeyDrDaniel)*
- Funding to do the work is the ongoing priority. We are always looking at ways to be creative because we are expected to make an impact [and] advocate for our teachers, students, programs, and materials. —*Cheri Sacco (@cherisacco4)*
- I focus on the needs of our most marginalized students, especially on ways to ensure that we have the tools and resources needed to teach them how to read. —*Nancy Antoine (@antoine_nancy)*

What communication methods have been most effective in communicating advocacy priorities to decision-makers?

- [Send] regular emails to legislators and state associations with your legislative platform and main goals. Zoom has been a great way to get policymakers together with principals to talk about issues. —*Roz Thompson (@rozthompson)*
- Develop a relationship with your elected officials, then visit, call, email, and write cards and letters. Invite them to your school. Visit their local office with other principals and/or your superintendent. —*Mark Terry (@tepsamark)*
- Social media can help us tell our stories and reach more people. Relationships make the work more personal, which in turn gets people involved. —*Heather Stukey (@PrincipalStukey)*
- Meeting face to face is so much more impactful. Anything helps, though: emails, social media tags, op-eds in newspapers, etc. Try sending a card from students or staff, and see what happens! —*Hayden Camp (@HaydenCamp1)*

Why advocate? "There is a lack of awareness and understanding of what happens [in schools] and what kids and staff need," says Camp, the principal of Werner Elementary School in Fort Collins, Colo. "There's an old saying: If you aren't at the table, you're probably on the menu." ●

SCHEDULE SCHOOL VISITS



Amy Schott, Henderson Elementary School, Dumfries, Virginia

Thanks to Schott's ongoing participation in Virginia's "Take Your Legislator to School Month," state delegates and senators pitch in regularly at Henderson to read to kids or teach lessons in government. Now that she has established relationships, Schott makes "a habit of contacting legislators in session to show support or opposition to legislation, and will always share how or why the policy will either hurt or benefit our students."

How did you get started, and what steps or actions were involved?

Two of the easiest ways to become involved in advocacy are to join a professional association and take the time to get to know your legislators. I have invited legislators to participate in events at my school, visit classrooms, and meet with me. The visits are a great opportunity for students to learn about government, in addition to providing opportunities for legislators to get to know the needs of schools.

How did you define your effectiveness or fine-tune your strategies?

One year, I was pleased that one of our state delegates [wrote] to inform former Superintendent Steve Walts and me that my in-person and written communications helped him determine his position on a proposed bill, and that made me realize how worthwhile every visit and note can be! In general, I measure my effectiveness and that of my colleagues by the bills passed, [and whether those bills] support or hurt public education.

What advice can you offer to other educators who might want to do something similar?

Your voice, knowledge, experience, and expertise are critical in shaping educational policy. Become familiar with your association and school system's legislative priorities and stay on top of education research and trends, as well as proposed legislation. It's simple: If educators are not the ones shaping policy, the education and well-being of our students might be at stake.



Virginia Delegate Rich Anderson (R-51st) joined students on Pajama Day for a presentation on how a bill becomes a law.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS



Equetta Jones, H.O. Brittingham Elementary, Milton, Delaware

Jones' advocacy brought the role of the assistant principal into focus for state and federal education officials and legislators. She helped outline and define AP-specific professional development in Delaware and is now lobbying for the state to fund APs' association memberships. "I feel that APs now have a voice—they feel heard, appreciated, and valued," she says. "As my passion continues to grow, I will ensure that no AP is left behind."

How did you get started, and what steps or actions were involved?

It took a lot of sitting down, Googling, emailing, and phone calls. It takes being naïve—being vulnerable. You don't know what you don't know, but you have to put yourself out there. After leaving the NAESP Pre-K-8 Principals Conference in Chicago, I reached out to NAESP's Zone 3 director and found out who the state person was. It's taking the time to do the homework, finding out who the players are, and making them aware of your needs.

How did you define your effectiveness or fine-tune your strategies?

I knew it was effective when APs started to reach out to me saying, "Wow, how do you do this?" I'd say, "OK, since you're calling me, these are some of the things I've done." Another district called me and asked how to get administrators more engaged. That's when I knew that the fight was well worth it.

How has your advocacy impacted the school community?

We have developed a kind of pipeline for APs that touches multiple states. So many doors have opened; I thought [my potential influence] was so small, and now a lot of people call me the AP cheerleader.

What advice can you offer to other educators who might want to do something similar?

Be diligent. Doors will be shut, and frustrations will be had, but you can't give up. Also know that you're not alone—go out and get a friend to help. You also have to be able to compromise. You might not get everything you want in that moment, but you might be able to push some changes through. Ask people, "What can I do to help you understand the importance of this?" ●

Danny Carlson is NAESP's associate executive director, policy and advocacy. NAESP's Kaylen Tucker and Krysia Gabenski contributed to this article.