

# Leaders We Need Now: The Principal's Role in Changing Education Policy

*Principals who combine research-based studies with their personal experience as school leaders when advocating for education and the principal profession amplify urgent needs in schools. Use this resource as a starting point to engage with legislators and district leaders on important policy issues affecting schools.*

## Principal-Led Focus Groups

Through the Leaders We Need Now (LWNN) research series, conducted by the American Institutes for Research from April through June 2021, NAESP set out to learn from in-depth conversations with principals—188 elementary school principals in 43 states—how crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and social injustice in 2020-21 changed the profession and education and what principals need from policy makers to overcome challenges they face in their schools.

## What We Learned: New Demands Require Greater Support—Right Now

The research showed that new demands like crisis management and social media and communications management led principals to prioritize certain Professional Standards for Education Leaders standards over others. Priorities such as engaging in frontline services like contact tracing and COVID-19 mitigation strategies and providing social-emotional learning demanded more of principals' time over priorities such as equity, cultural responsiveness, and school improvement.



Learn more at  
[naesp.org/LWNN](https://naesp.org/LWNN)

## The research series produced three briefs:



*Leaders in  
Tumult: Schooling  
Innovations and  
New Perspectives  
From a Year  
Interrupted*



*Evolution of the  
Principalship:  
Leaders Tell Us  
How the Profession  
Is Changing  
Through a Most  
Difficult Year*



*Principals'  
Perspectives  
on Policy: What  
Education Leaders  
Seek Through  
Policy*

## Get Involved:

# Principal Advocacy Can Shape K-12 Policies and Legislation

The principal voice is more important than ever in influencing education policy. In the third LWNN brief, *Principals' Perspectives on Policy*, principals identified five themes on which policymakers must meaningfully engage principals as they create policies that affect the future of education and the principal profession. Principals can advocate for these policies to address the challenges the LWNN research highlights when speaking with federal representatives, state and local legislators, and district leaders.

**1 Principal Pipelines and Workforce Incentives:** Sustaining the principal pipeline and succession planning; improving financial incentives to help recruit and retain the best educators.

**Legislative Ask:** *Bolster investments in the educator pipeline by strengthening pre-service preparation, expanding financial incentives, and enhancing support structures to attract new principals into the field and retain those currently leading schools.*

**2 Testing and Accountability:** Principals want policymakers to consider a broader range of factors for school performance, beyond testing, and minimize testing requirements, noting that they believe standardized tests are overemphasized.

**Legislative Ask:** *Reduce emphasis on standardized tests as the only way to determine student success and explore other measures such as the social and emotional needs of students.*

**3 Principal and Teacher Preparation and Professional Development:** Noting a disconnect between academic coursework and actual practices, principals emphasized the need for on-the-job coaching and professional development for principals and that they should be consulted when determining topics for professional development. Principals identified a particular need to better understand how to leverage student teachers and support new teachers in the first few years after their preparation.

**Legislative Ask:** *Boost pre-service clinical-based practice opportunities, increase investments in professional development focused on job-embedded and cohort-based learning, and help principals maximize their impact as instructional leaders.*

**4 Honoring, Recognizing, and Listening to Principals:** Principals want policymakers to better recognize them for the hard work through increased efforts like school visits to understand what school leaders go through on a daily basis before they make policy decisions and enact new legislation.

**Legislative Ask:** *Develop communication channels with principals to create “feedback loops” with principals to know and understand their needs.*

**5 Funding and Resources:** Though grateful for recent increases in federal funding, principals report feeling anxious because the manner in which the funding was released doesn't support long-term reform to address many challenges, including recruiting and retaining school-based mental health professionals.

**Legislative Ask:** *Provide funding that is sustained, targeted, and flexible that addresses needs identified by principals—the individuals who know best their school's needs.*