

March 26, 2010

The Honorable George Miller
Chairman
House Education and Labor Committee
2181 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable John Kline
Ranking Member
House Education and Labor Committee
2101 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Miller and Ranking Member Kline:

On behalf of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and 60,000 of our nation's elementary and middle-level principals, thank you for the opportunity to submit comments as the Committee begins consideration of reforms to improve our nation's schools through the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). We applaud your commitment to moving the process of reauthorization forward so that every child, regardless of circumstances, will be afforded a world-class education.

NAESP respectfully urges the committee to consider the following comments in its renewal of the law, which are discussed in greater detail below:

- **Exclude any model of school improvement reforms that cannot be substantiated by evidence-based research, particularly those requiring the firing of principals and teachers without regard to training, expertise, and time afforded in the school building to implement reforms. NAESP opposes the U.S. Department of Education's unprecedented regulatory intrusion into local schools through the School Improvement Grant Program and furthered by the Administration's ESEA "Blueprint for Reform."**
- **Preserve the emphasis on formula grants currently provided under ESEA. State and local administrators, especially in rural areas, will not have the capacity to compete fairly for funds that have traditionally been provided by formula grants.**
- **Include growth models as a measure of student success both academically and developmentally. These assessment data must be used among many other metrics, both formative and summative, that will be used in the local evaluation of teachers and principals.**
- **Increase access to professional development for principals based on research-based standards of practice, which are the norm for evaluating the fundamental and foundational skills needed to effectively lead learning communities. Provide high-quality, standards-based mentoring programs, especially for principals during their first three years of service. At a minimum, the renewed law should acknowledge the baseline standards that define what a principal should know and be able to do.**

- **Establish high-quality leadership immersion and mentoring programs that are designed to meet the unique needs of principals, especially those who need to gain specialized expertise in turning-around low-performing schools. The programs should provide for sufficient research, evaluation, and dissemination of effective “turnaround” strategies.**
- **Strengthen professional development programs for elementary level principals that are designed to provide knowledge for developing a seamless continuum of learning by aligning programs and services that support the social, emotional, and intellectual needs of children from prekindergarten through grade three. At a minimum, the law should include the foundational skills that elementary principals need to lead a learning community that supports high-quality early learning experiences through grade three.**

A well-established body of knowledge spanning the past 30 years proves what educators inherently know – second only to a great teacher in the classroom, a strong principal will improve student academic achievement. The most recent decade of research confirms three basic tenets: Our education system faces complex challenges in preparing children to be 21st century learners, there is a direct correlation between effective school leadership and student performance, and principals are responsible for meeting the developmental and cognitive needs of the most diverse student populations in our nation’s history. Principals are no longer just building managers – they must create professional learning environments where all adults are constantly improving their skills and knowledge and challenging one another to serve the learning and developmental needs of every student. The same research substantiates an unmistakable need to do a better job of preparing principals and other school leaders to meet the needs of teachers and students. We must invest in programs that will develop and support *all principals* in the profession in setting and inculcating a vision that puts student learning at the center of school's culture.ⁱ

Principals are confronted with a variety of complex tasks that require diverse skills, technical capabilities, high cognitive functioning, and emotional intelligence. They must function under demanding circumstances, have strong coping skills, and a thorough understanding of the complex nature of the job. Most important, they must understand that their expectations and actions set the tone for the school culture. Principals understand the need to set a vision and create a school culture that will positively influence student outcomes. They willingly accept this responsibility, especially the dedicated professionals who take on the challenges of turning around a low-performing school where leadership will have the greatest impact. Principals also know that schools are the sum of their parts, and while each part is integral to the whole, changing a piece or two, even one as crucial as the principal, will not change the whole story. Our lowest-performing schools need whole-school improvement, not piecemeal approaches.

As the committee considers proposals to improve low-performing schools in the reauthorization process, NAESP strongly opposes any model of school improvement, even those targeting the nation’s perennially low-performing schools, which require the dismissal of principals and teachers as part of the improvement process. The U.S. Department of Education has proposed such measures through unprecedented regulatory intrusion of our nation’s public schools in the School Improvement Grant Program, and it proposed the same groundless tactics in “*A Blueprint for Reform*” released earlier this month. As noted, simply replacing the principals and most of the teachers in a school will

not automatically result in dramatic, sustainable reform. To institute the commitment required to turning around low-performing schools and dramatically improve student achievement and school performance, principals must first have significant training to acquire a deep understanding of the fundamental skills related to what a principal and school leader should know and be able to do to effectively lead a school.

Strong principals must be further developed to enter into and manage the change process. Still, even principals with highly developed leadership skills must face conditions that potentially prevent them from making improvements – insufficient access to appropriate data, a well-trained workforce, and authority and autonomy to place resources where they are most needed the most, to name a few such factors.

NAESP believes that the Administration’s call for greater competition—especially for any resources that have been traditionally provided by formula—will diminish the capacity of district and local administrators, including teachers and principals, to lead sustainable school improvement reforms. Teachers and principals require the support of on-going and job-embedded professional development opportunities and to be evaluated based on multiple measures, including student academic performance. Sustainable reform can only occur once these resources have been provided over a sufficient period of time. Then—and only then—should the removal of a principal be considered.

NAESP also urges the committee to take into account the variety of ways in which children succeed and how their achievements should be measured to accurately gauge their emotional and social development, language fluency and comprehension, creativity, adaptability, critical thinking and problem-solving skills as well as their proficiency in core academic content areas. Measuring these factors and many others that contribute to improved student outcomes provides a complete picture, not the snapshot taken by a standardized test score that does not evaluate the multitude of ways students progress academically and developmentally. Single-metric assessment produces a one-dimensional view of the child – as well as the teacher, the principal, and the school.

NAESP’s gold standard for what principals should know and be able to do, *Leading Learning Communities*,ⁱⁱ provides a ready blueprint for educating the whole child. It provides principals with a comprehensive resource on evidence-based strategies for effective school leadership:

- Lead schools in a way that places student and adult learning at the center;
- Set high expectations and standards for the academic, social, emotional, and physical development of all students;
- Demand content and instruction that ensure student achievement of agreed-upon standards;
- Create a culture of continuous learning for adults tied to student learning and other school goals;
- Manage data and knowledge to inform decisions and measure progress of student, adult, and school performance; and,

- Actively engage the community to create shared responsibility for student academic performance and successful development.

New policies in ESEA must support professional development for principals through high-quality leadership mentoring programs based on these standards to sufficiently equip principals with the knowledge and skills required in the profession, particularly during their first three years of service.

Mentoring programs address a number of gaps in principal preparation and training, including understanding *how* to use a variety of assessment and evaluation data to drive instruction. Evidence also shows that principals who engage in training and professional mentoring programs aligned to the standards of leading learning communities are more successful in setting a shared vision and school culture that leads to school improvement, particularly those leading struggling schools.

Principals also know what an abundance of research now proves: Success in the elementary years begins long before students enter classrooms. Children from low-income families who attend year-round, full-day pre-kindergarten programs are half as likely to need special education services in later grade; they are more likely to graduate from high school, career- and college-ready; and they are far less likely to commit juvenile crime.

Now more than ever, elementary school principals understand the significance of early childhood learning and the importance of creating a seamless continuum of learning from early childhood learning settings to their school buildings. High-quality early childhood education and learning experiences are crucial to an elementary level principal's ability to establish a shared vision that shapes a school culture and enhances instructional leadership. Principals must partner with locally based early childhood programs that are striving to lay the foundation for later learning and create an aligned system that particularly provides supports for low-income children. The aligned systems spanning prekindergarten through grade three require a myriad of programs and services that help children achieve higher levels of social, emotional, and intellectual success, and ultimately increase academic proficiency.

Building successful prekindergarten through grade three alignment systems that effectively interface with comprehensive programs and services is an essential investment in ensuring that at-risk children (particularly those who are low income) who often begin their education lagging their peers have a chance to learn on equal footing. However, preparation programs and school systems lack sufficient training and professional development opportunities to help principals effectively design and implement practices that support this continuum of learning. In communities where prekindergarten programs are not typically part of the school system, principals must know about and have access to best practices in early childhood education; developmentally appropriate learning activities, teaching practices, and assessments; and skills for forging meaningful relationships with the early childhood community.

NAESP recommends that ESEA now recognize the important role of elementary principals in providing support for a continuum of learning from prekindergarten through grade three in their schools and communities and provide them with the guidance and support to expand the capacity to invest in the future of every child's academic success.

In 2005, NAESP issued a landmark publication to outline the standards that principals must know and be able to do, *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities*,ⁱⁱⁱ to provide guidance for principals in designing aligned prekindergarten through grade three systems and implementing high-quality early childhood programs.

The standards focus on helping principals rethink the connection between early childhood and elementary schools. Indicators of effective early learning alignment rely on six standards of what principals must be able to master and demonstrate:

- Support for an expanded continuum of learning that includes children from age three through age eight or prekindergarten through grade three;
- Engagement of families and the school learning community in understanding early learning development;
- Promotion of school environments that are developmentally and age appropriate and address individual ways of learning;
- Provision of high-quality curriculum and instructional practices that foster young children's learning and development;
- Use of multiple developmentally-appropriate assessments to create experiences that strengthen student learning; and,
- Balance of leadership and management roles to incorporate quality early learning programs into the school culture.

NAESP firmly believes that new policies to strengthen school leadership should also include standards and program strategies for principals to create comprehensive early childhood programs. The standards provide direction to effective alignment strategies that include:

- Working with families directly to provide bridge programs and services to the elementary school;
- Creating coalitions with community organizations to support children in their home environments;
- Providing facilities and settings for early learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate and informed by cultural differences, including those that promote health and safety;
- Leading instructional activities; and,
- Providing professional learning opportunities for teachers so they have the tools needed to implement high quality early learning classroom practices.

Principals and school leaders who engage in professional development designed to enhance their proficiency in implementing these activities will ensure that high-quality early learning programs are a part of every school system and community.

Thank you for your consideration of the recommendations included herein and for your efforts to build the capacity of our nation's elementary and middle level principals so every child has an equal opportunity to acquire an excellent education and become a productive member of our society.

Sincerely,



Gail Connelly
Executive Director

cc:

The Honorable Dale Kildee, Chairman
Subcommittee on Early Childhood and Elementary and Secondary Education

The Honorable Michael Castle, Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Early Childhood and Elementary and Secondary Education

ⁱTim Waters, Robert J. Marzano and Brian McNulty, *Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning*, 2003

ⁱⁱ *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*. National Association of Elementary School Principals, Second Edition, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Leading Early Childhood Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*. National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2005.