

# Where the Buck Stops

**T**he Buck Stops Here,” an expression popularized by President Harry S. Truman, has often been applied to school leadership. It denotes the end of the line, the last decision, the final responsibility. For principals, who assume the dual roles of school manager and instructional leader, the responsibilities of school leadership never end; the “bucks” just keep coming.

With upwards of 40 different daily tasks to accomplish, today’s principals must be multifaceted, possessing a range of skills and competencies more complex than ever before.

When it comes to the factors that they directly influence, such as student safety, financial management, teacher working conditions, and high-quality instruction, for example, principals must rely on their “managerial” capabilities. This role also involves brokering various stakeholder interests and contending with unfunded state mandates, among other escalating education issues.

In this era of high-stakes accountability, the pressure has never been greater for principals to excel also as instructional leaders. Research shows the link between school leadership and student achievement continues to be underestimated, despite the fact that a principal’s influence is second only to classroom instruction in improving test scores. It is the principal’s direct influence on instruction—and therefore indirect influence on learning—that fosters student success.

As the demands mount, principals continue to provide flexible scheduling to allow for daily student interventions and job-embedded professional learning for teachers; creative budgeting that prioritizes coaching and data analysis; and communications systems that keep parents and other stakeholders involved. These and similar conditions that promote learning can only be established through a principal’s leadership.

## Instructional Leadership, Defined

Despite 30 years of research showing the direct and indirect impact school principals have on student achievement and school improvement, federal policy has largely overlooked the vital role of the principal as instructional leader. NAESP continues to be a strong voice for principal leadership, advocating on Capitol Hill, to the U.S. Department of Education, and to various policymakers. In 2013, NAESP published the policy brief, *Recruiting, Preparing and Building the Capacity of Effective Principals: Eight Evidence-Based Recommendations for Federal Policymaking*, which outlines key actions that today’s principal-as-instructional-leader must take. Principals must, for example:



- Create and sustain a vision for school performance that includes high achievement for all students;
- Manage resources, such as human capital, time, data, and funding;
- Support teachers with sufficient professional development and collaborative time;
- Create safe learning environments and develop strong relationships with parents and stakeholders; and
- Actively engage the community to create shared responsibility for student academic performance and successful development.

It’s a tall order, to say the least. Luckily, many principals can count on collaborative structures, such as teacher-leader networks, to assist them. Teachers—as resource providers, instructional and curriculum specialists, mentors, team leaders, and data coaches—can help principals enhance their capacity and create a culture of collective responsibility. The Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium’s 2011 report, *Teacher Leader Model Standards*, examines such roles and how they are distinguished from, and work in tandem with, effective principal leadership.

In light of the research on the impact of principal leadership, advocacy is vital to bringing national attention to the urgent need for better principal support. Barriers (such as inadequate preparation, isolated working conditions, and a disconnect between accountability systems and the elements principals directly influence) continue to impede progress.

NAESP recommends that the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act ensure that states develop definitions of principal effectiveness and next-generation evaluation systems. The current law falls short not only of recognizing principals, but also defining how systems should identify effective leaders based on student achievement and other multiple measures of outcomes and practice that principals directly influence. Beyond that, states should hold principal preparation programs accountable for ensuring that principals are sufficiently equipped to lead. This will begin to create a pathway for principals to succeed and to strengthen policies toward ensuring a capable and equitably distributed pool of effective school leaders. Lend your voice to this critical effort at NAESP’s Legislative Action Center ([naesp.org/advocacy](http://naesp.org/advocacy)).

We must do all we can to invest in and support our nation’s principals who are dealing with unprecedented challenges. Without question, today’s most effective principals know how to leverage their managerial responsibilities to focus more of their energy on instructional leadership. Collectively, principals hold ultimate responsibility for the education of some 55 million children. Principals take this stewardship quite seriously, and because many feel they are “called to serve,” I’ll wager that most principals never stop thinking, “The Buck Stops Here.” **■**