

Critical Conversations

Every year, I look forward to attending NAESP's annual conference, "Best Practices for Better Schools," and connecting personally with principals from across the nation. In Nashville this summer, while the mercury rose outside the Gaylord Opryland Convention Center, I had the opportunity to sit down and talk with both new and familiar faces to take the pulse of the profession. Again and again I heard the voice of determined and optimistic school leaders, who are soldiering on despite their overwhelming frustration in carrying out the unprecedented confluence of new requirements and responsibilities brought on by the unrelenting pace of educational reform.

As schools reopen their doors this year, principals are feeling the weight of implementing new, more rigorous assessments, and adjusting operations to navigate new school nutrition and discipline rules, as well as facing a seemingly impossible number of teacher and staff evaluations to conduct in a limited amount of time. In addition to tackling the issues of community messaging, staff buy-in, professional development, and curriculum revision that come with each new initiative, principals must also project confidence, which is critical to reassuring stakeholders and maintaining a positive school climate.

How are principals facing these myriad challenges that are piled onto their already overflowing plates? By taking advantage of opportunities to connect with colleagues facing similar challenges, hearing how their peers are tackling the issues head-on, and developing their own solutions to meet their schools and learning communities' needs.

Professional Connections

This is no time for principals to go it alone. As I've seen firsthand over the years and freshly again in Nashville, when instructional leaders can connect professionally for conversations critical to solving problems and sharing best practices, they are more effective and confident in leading their schools and more adept at managing and communicating change. So when it comes to facilitating critical conversations throughout the upcoming year and beyond, look to NAESP. Connecting principals with their colleagues across the country is one of our highest priorities.

Many conference sessions this summer focused on the power of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to help principals build networks for embedded professional development, streamlined family engagement, connected leadership, and more. Now, NAESP is going beyond instructing members in how to harness these tech-



nologies to actually putting such tools and channels into place to extend the conference experience, provide additional resources, and facilitate connections among principals wherever they may be.

New Interactive Online Community

Through a partnership with the webinar-hosting platform, edWeb, NAESP has created Leading Learning Communities, an online learning community where members can build a professional network, collaborate with peers across the country, and access ideas that work. This interactive arm of NAESP also lets members converse and collaborate through webinars, chat tools, threaded discussions, and personal learning networks. We invite you to get a head start on the school year by reviewing our webinar calendar and adding your voice to current conversations around Common Core, teacher evaluation, school culture, technology, early childhood education, and other pressing topics. Register for free at www.edweb.net/leadinglearning.

Raising Awareness

NAESP is also actively promoting critical conversations through principal recognition throughout October, which is National Principals Month. As in the past three years, advocacy activities will include a Principal Shadowing Day, where U.S. Department of Education policymakers will personally experience a day in the life of Washington D.C.-area principals and see education policies in action. This event will again culminate in a debriefing session with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, with participants sharing experiences and observations. NAESP additionally supports principal recognition in October with tools, templates, and activities school leaders can use to enlighten their communities about their roles in the education process. (Visit www.principalsmonth.org for more information.)

October also marks NAESP's annual National Distinguished Principals (NDP) recognition program. We congratulate this year's 61 elementary and middle school winners for their innovative leadership and outstanding accomplishments, and are honored to share their inspiring stories as well as their contact information for networking on the NAESP website.

After the Nashville conference, one principal-blogger posted three reflections: "together we lift each other up," "positivity is contagious," and "with digital technologies, the concept of 'here' is no longer limited to a physical location." These are reasons why no principal today has to operate in isolation. As you take on this school year with courage and compassion, NAESP is working more than ever to support robust principal networks both online and face-to-face. For principals to lead students, schools, and communities successfully through the current seismic shifts in education, critical conversations will be key. 