

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LEADING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

# Pillars, Practices, and Priorities for Effective Principals



**National Association of Elementary School Principals**  
*Serving all elementary and middle-level principals*

“An expanding base of knowledge from research and practice shows that educational leaders exert influence on student achievement by creating challenging but also caring and supportive conditions conducive to each student’s learning. They relentlessly develop and support teachers, create positive working conditions, effectively allocate resources, construct appropriate organizational policies and systems, and engage in other deep and meaningful work outside of the classroom that has a powerful impact on what happens inside it.”

—National Policy Board for Educational Administration

## About Leading Learning Communities

Principals are the lifeforces that animate the schools they lead. They are builders of organizational culture. They are instructional leaders. They are champions of diversity, equity, and inclusivity. They are communicators and ambassadors of their school's vision for teaching and learning. They are also operations managers, caretakers, and caregivers. They are data analysts. They are agents of continual improvement. They are the heart of their learning communities.

*Leading Learning Communities: Pillars, Practices, and Priorities for Effective Principals*, like the two editions of *Leading Learning Communities* that preceded it, is designed to be a practical resource for new and experienced principals. It is a guidebook by and for principals. It is a distillation of the role of principal, informed and shaped by experienced principals in diverse schools across the country. It articulates a vision, and practical strategies for what effective principals do, focused on a core set of abilities and beliefs.

With the publication of the 2015 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), the field has agreed upon student-centered, evidence- and practice-based standards, designed to communicate expectations for the work, capabilities, and values of education leaders. NAESP played a pivotal role in the PSEL development and supports their adoption by school leaders in all settings. The principal leadership pillars, priorities, and practices described in this edition of *Leading Learning Communities* are intentionally aligned to the PSEL and to pre-existing NAESP mentoring standards, providing a concise and practice-oriented philosophy of the principalship.

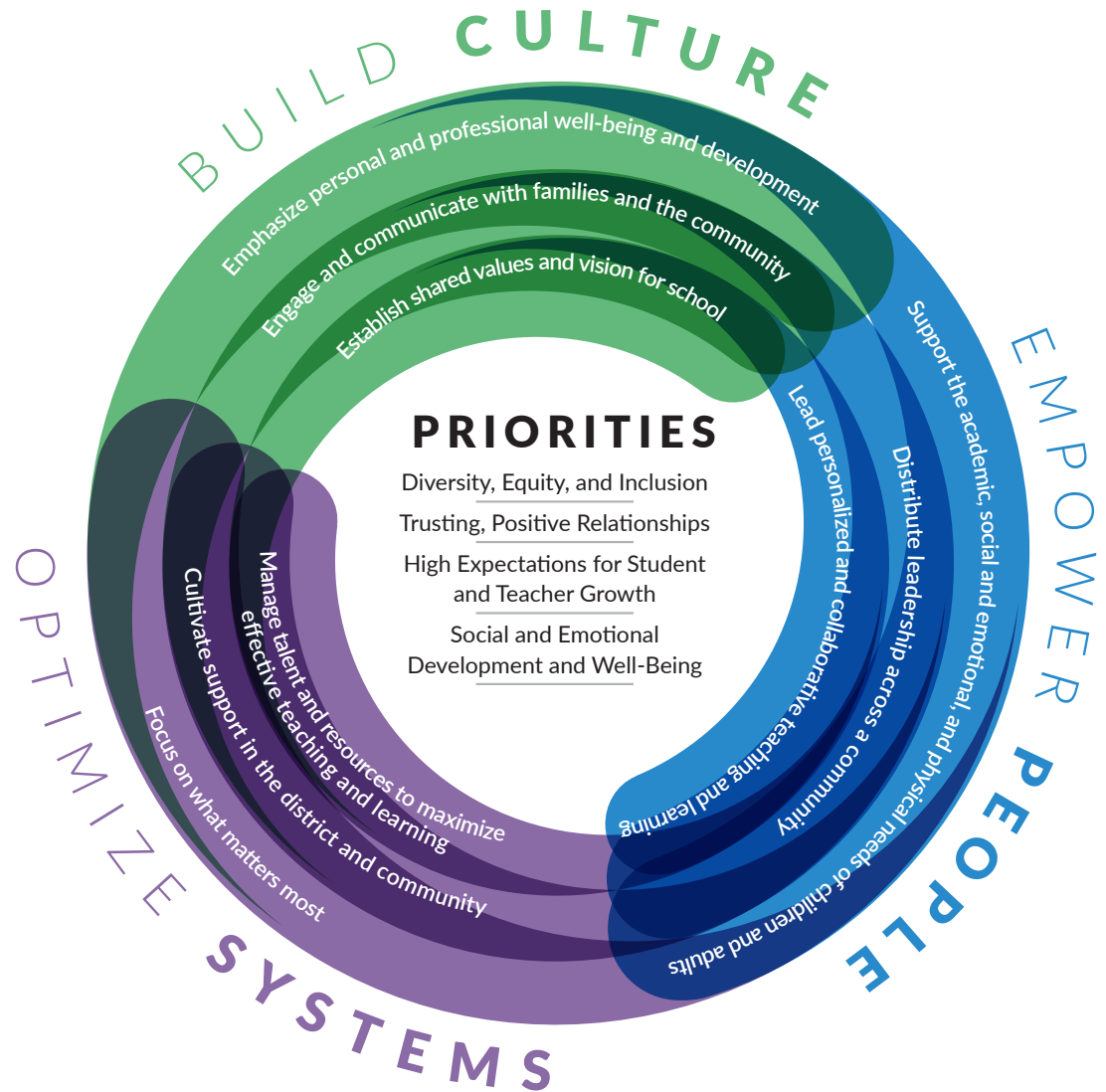
This summary provides an overview of the core ideas presented in *Leading Learning Communities: Pillars, Practices, and Priorities for Effective Principals*. To acquire a copy of the full publication, please contact NAESP.

## Pillars, Practices, and Priorities for Effective Principals

### **Leading Learning**

**Communities** presents a theory of the principalship organized around three main areas of focus—referred to here as **pillars**—that represent the “what” of the principalship. These pillars are mutually supportive, mutually dependent, and overlapping; without one, the strength of the other two is compromised. These pillars represent the basis of the three major sections of the publication.

Within each pillar are three key **practices**; these practices represent “how” effective principals operate. Each pillar and practice is informed by a shared set of **priorities**. These priorities constitute the “why” of what effective principals do every day; they represent core beliefs about the characteristics, in addition to quality academics, of successful learning communities.



## Three Pillars of the Principalship

### PILLARS

#### **Effective principals:**

**Build culture** to create schools that are great places to teach and learn.

**Empower people** to lead learning in ways that bring out the best in teachers and students.

**Optimize systems** to ensure that school operations, processes, and contexts support effective teaching and learning.

### PRIORITIES

Effective school leadership makes it possible for schools to improve continually in their efforts to advance learning and well-being for students and teachers alike. This kind of leadership is predicated on principals' core beliefs and priorities about what makes a school a great place to teach and learn.

The core priorities of effective principals are expansive and cross-cutting. They extend beyond the more technical aspects of school leadership and inform everything effective principals do, from their decision making about how to allocate school resources or teacher retention strategies to their daily interactions with students and adults in their building. These priorities undergird what caring adults believe are elements of constructive learning environments.

Effective principals organize their school leadership practice around valuing, defending, and cultivating:

- **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**
- **High Expectations for Student and Teacher Growth**
- **Trusting, Positive Relationships**
- **Social and Emotional Development and Well-Being**

Effective principals know that these priorities must be reflected in every one of their leadership practices and decisions if they are to ensure that their schools are welcoming and inclusive—and capable of providing equitable educational and professional opportunities for all students and adults. Effective principals understand that achieving the vision of their schools depends on trusting, positive relationships, as well as high expectations for student and teacher growth. Effective principals recognize that equity, relationships, and growth all require a deep commitment—evident in daily practice—to the social and emotional development and well-being of everyone in the school, including principals themselves.

In this way, the priorities of effective principals are not separate concerns. They overlap and permeate the school's mission, culture, instruction, and operations. For effective principals, these interrelated and interdependent priorities are essential to helping schools to flourish.

### PRACTICES

#### **Effective principals build culture by:**

- Establishing shared values and vision for schools
- Engaging and communicating with families and the community
- Emphasizing personal and professional well-being and development

#### **Effective principals empower people by:**

- Leading personalized and collaborative teaching and learning
- Distributing leadership among a community
- Supporting the academic, social and emotional, and physical needs of children and adults

#### **Effective principals optimize systems by:**

- Managing talent and resources to maximize effective teaching and learning
- Cultivating support in the district and community
- Focusing on what matters most

# BUILD CULTURE

## Create Schools That Are Great Places To Teach and Learn

Culture exerts a powerful effect on teaching, learning, and everything else that takes place at school. School culture informs what teachers, students, families and the community believe about the school and its purpose. Culture shapes what teachers and students value. It impacts how teachers relate to and interact with students and each other, and what they imagine is possible when it comes to their teaching and professional growth. For these reasons, and others, effective principals devote a significant amount of time and energy to building the culture of their schools.

“Everything a leader does—her statements and philosophy, reactions to key events, energy, and interaction style—influences culture in a powerful way.”

—Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell, Harvard Graduate School of Education

Effective principals’ efforts to sustain and strengthen school culture extend into the community, where they seek to meaningfully engage families, community members, and external stakeholders. Schools are not institutions set apart from the communities they serve; rather, they are focal points in which the community and its constituent members can be deeply invested. Effective principals ensure that the community is a bulwark of school culture that contributes to learning and growth. They do this by communicating the school’s values, translating its efforts to advance student learning and well-being into clear language that resonates with families and the community, and providing authentic opportunities for the community to participate in the life of the school.

# EMPOWER PEOPLE

## Lead Learning To Bring Out the Best in Teachers and Students

Effective principals bring out the best in teachers, students, and themselves. “The best,” in this instance, refers to more than just instructional, academic, or leadership performance. It also encompasses other dimensions of individual and collective experience at school—all of which matter to performance—including personal and professional growth, social and emotional well-being, mental and physical health, and high expectations for peers, colleagues, and self.

For this reason, effective principals focus on empowering people, in terms of their individual capacities and collectively as a learning community. They do so both as a means of strengthening school culture and to continuously improve teaching and learning. More than programs or facilities, people determine whether or not a school is a great place to teach and learn.

“Effective principals enable effective teaching, at scale, across the whole school.”

–New Leaders

Principals are widely understood to be the second-most influential school-based factor when it comes to student achievement. Much of this influence is attributed to the various ways that principals increase teacher effectiveness. These include leading professional learning; building teacher capacity to improve instruction; teacher hiring and retention, with a focus on building and sustaining a diverse and effective faculty; and ensuring that school resources and systems align to enable teachers to succeed in the classroom and grow as educators.

# OPTIMIZE SYSTEMS

## **Ensure That School Operations, Processes, and Contexts Support Effective Teaching and Learning**

As important as instruction and interpersonal relationships are to a school's success, so too are internal and external systems that enable culture and people to flourish. From the procedures and criteria used to hire teachers and other school personnel, to scheduling decisions, resource allocation, and how the school operates in relation to the district, systems and structures play a vital role in creating the conditions that get the best from people and promote positive school culture.

“In short, an effective principal is a master of managing people, data, and processes.”

—National Association of Elementary School Principals

Guiding concerns for effective principals, when confronted with an operational or resource allocation decision, include: How will this decision affect teachers and improve or impair their instructional capabilities? How will this decision contribute to academic growth and student well-being? How will this decision improve or sustain school culture? By thinking through such questions, effective principals meld leadership and management—often blurring any meaningful distinction of the two.

Effective principals value and promote high-impact programming and initiatives—such as arts education, afterschool programs, and social and emotional learning—and they find ways to ensure that these such programs and initiatives are sustained with the resources they need to be successful. Effective principals also know that every effective initiative or strategy, and every tenet of school culture relies on appropriate support structures, data, processes, and people to aid implementation and sustainability.



## Guiding Questions for Principals

### BUILD CULTURE

**What are the fundamental aspects of school culture? Where and how are they expressed?**

**What does it mean to prioritize equity and inclusivity as fundamental to positive school culture? What does equity look like in practice?**

**How can building school culture advance teaching and learning and improve the well-being of students and educators? What are the impacts if principals neglect school culture?**

### EMPOWER PEOPLE

**What is a principal's fundamental role when it comes to instructional leadership and strengthening the capabilities of teachers? How can principals scale this role appropriately in view of their other responsibilities?**

**How can principals cultivate collaboration among teachers and empower them to lead and share responsibility for improving instruction and student outcomes?**

**In what ways are student growth and achievement connected to their well-being? How can principals systematically and interpersonally support the developmental and health needs of students and teachers?**

### OPTIMIZE SYSTEMS

**How does a principal's approach to managing operations, systems, and resources impact teaching and learning? In what ways can principals organize these factors to best support teachers and effectively meet student needs?**

**How do management and leadership considerations overlap? In what ways are they distinct? How can principals be effective leaders and managers at the same time?**

**How does the district and community context influence teaching, learning, and well-being in a school? How can this influence be leveraged to support teaching and learning?**

## National Association of Elementary School Principals

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) is the premier organization and strongest unified voice for pre-K-8 leaders across the U.S. and around the world. NAESP's mission is to lead in the advocacy and support for elementary and middle-level principals and other education leaders in their commitment to all children. NAESP's vision for early learning, elementary, and middle level leaders includes principals having the vision, courage, wisdom, and professional knowledge to lead learning communities that create opportunities for all children to achieve their highest potential.



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