

# A Brand New Sputnik Moment

When Americans picked up their newspapers on the morning of October 5, 1957 and read about the Soviets' launch of the Sputnik satellite, the realization of Russia's technical superiority galvanized the country into immediate action. NASA was created, the Space Race was officially on, and sweeping reforms in science and engineering education were enacted by Congress the very next year.

The recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) marks a similarly extraordinary time in history for education. With the pendulum poised to shift away from a narrow focus on high-stakes accountability and rigid standards toward a more balanced "systems" approach to increasing student achievement, school leaders have an unprecedented opportunity to become what education theorist and author Michael Fullan terms "motion leaders."

As the primary force for mobilizing leadership in others and setting in motion a culture of continuous reflection and growth, motion leaders are key to the kind of whole-system reform that Fullan says needs to remain continuously in action. His vision of the principal as a capacity-builder—both as a change agent who will challenge the status quo and as a team leader who can bring together stakeholders in diverse organizations at local, state, and federal levels—closely aligns with the newly minted Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL).

PSEL, which replaced the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards, are flexible, aspirational, and designed to grow and transform as demands and expectations of principals change over time. With an increased focus on connecting educational leadership to student learning, creating cultures of improvement, and other big picture concepts, the standards can be seen, in part, as a force for helping principals remind us as a nation that the moral purpose of educational change is to improve society and the lives of its citizens, especially those most in need.

## Motion Leadership In Action

There is no shortage of examples of principals who already demonstrate the characteristics of a motion leader. I see them every day.

- At a Massachusetts school for primary-age children with special needs, the principal partners with community mental and physical health professionals to provide a supportive network for her students and their families.
- At a high-poverty elementary school in Arkansas, the principal has created a Parent University to educate families of English-language learners and has honed the skills of negotiation, bargaining, and public relations

to establish community partnerships, and has set up a wellness clinic onsite to serve her mostly-uninsured student body.

- In the Bronx borough of New York, a principal partners with local arts groups to expose his students to both fine and performing arts, including Broadway shows.
- In Texas, the principal of a new school goes door-to-door to introduce herself to families of students and invite them to attend a welcome night prior to the first day of school.
- In a high-poverty, urban middle school in Mississippi, the principal has partnered with local businesses to develop a community garden that students work in to grow fresh vegetables they can take home—and good deeds can earn them credit for supplies at the school store.



Principals have proved to be expert innovators in developing these types of targeted interventions that improve learning experiences for the students they serve. Transformational leadership not only pushes the boundaries in instruction, but also leverages the unique role of the principal to make a lasting impact in schools, systems, and communities.

## Finally, Funding

ESSA is providing hundreds of millions of dollars for principal preparation, training, and recruiting—the first time the funds have been set aside solely for principal training. The principals above and others I've spoken with say they embrace the new opportunities these funds will bring to work more collaboratively—both inside and outside of their districts—to come to consensus on a vision, to share best practices, and to nurture leadership skills in others.

The new ESSA legislation may be as close as we've come to a "Sputnik moment" for education in the 21st century. It signifies the type of school leadership that Fullan describes as a fundamental and profound shift to a more expansive understanding of the complex role of principals, and ways in which they should and could be more effective lead learners. Instead of waiting for the proverbial pendulum to swing, principals will need to be the key motion leaders to push it farther and faster in the direction that best serves children. ■

*PSEL standards were developed by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, of which NAESP is a member. Access the 2015 PSEL standards at [www.npbea.org](http://www.npbea.org)*