

# A Call to Action

**M**odern-day schools are highly complex organizations that operate with an urgent imperative: Educate all children and young people to achieve their highest potential so they are prepared to thrive in a world most adults can scarcely imagine.

Realizing this goal, school by school, from pre-K to grade 12, requires principals who nurture comprehensive learning communities, lead and inspire teachers and students, and make schools portals to 21st century learning where creativity, collaboration, and critical thinking are as valued as basic skills in reading and math. Increasingly, principals are carrying out their challenging and essential work amid the highly pressurized, often politicized discussions related to accountability.

The fundamental questions about accountability are quite simple to state but extremely difficult to answer:

*What's fair*, given principals' limited direct influence on teaching and learning?

*What's accurate*, given the challenge of balancing standardized test scores with multiple measures to assess student success?

*What's valid*, given the unique contexts of individual schools and communities?

*What's the purpose*, given the too-frequent misuse of evaluation processes as a pretext for disciplinary action rather than an opportunity to enhance the capacity of individual principals?

In short, what are the conditions and results for which principals should be held accountable?

NAESP launched a multi-year initiative to find answers to these complex questions, a project that began in 2010 with an analysis of the available research on principal evaluation systems by Matthew Clifford, senior research scientist, American Institutes for Research, and Steven Ross, professor, Center for Research and Reform in Education, Johns Hopkins University.

In their initial analysis, Clifford and Ross discovered that principal evaluation practices hold great promise for building the capacity of principals and by doing so, help strengthen schools. They also identified serious concerns about the consistency, fairness, and value of such practices, including the absence of the voice of the principal in their own evaluation processes.

As a result, last year, NAESP invited NASSP to partner in convening a special Principal Evaluation Committee of building-level principals and the researchers to develop a new framework for evaluating principals' performance—one that reflects the complexity of the principalship,



measures principals' leadership competencies that are necessary for student success, builds the capacity of principals, and seeks out the insight and experience that only practicing principals can bring to bear on this crucially important topic.

The report centers on six essential elements of effective evaluation systems, informed by research and the voice and wisdom of principals. (See "Rethinking Principal Evaluation" on page 36 and go to [www.naesp.org](http://www.naesp.org) for details.) Individually, the elements are reasonable, compelling, and practical. Incorporating any single one in an imperfect evaluation process would enhance such a system. However, the ideal situation calls for developing new or revamping existing principal evaluation

systems that incorporate the six essential elements principals deem to be vitally important in measuring and enhancing their leadership.

Collectively, the elements gain real, substantial power. Viewed and implemented as a whole, they represent a sea change in how and why principals are evaluated. As such, there's great potential in leveraging this new framework as a cornerstone of school improvement. Here's why: It builds on decades of research and reams of reports about school leadership that say principals are second only to

classroom teachers in influencing student achievement. We know that a teacher can create a great classroom, but only a principal can create and sustain a great school. If we want great schools, we must support, strengthen, and invest in great principals, beginning with implementing evaluation processes that measure the right things and build principals' capacity, not serve as a pretext for unfair disciplinary action.

Still, new evaluation systems will not be perfect, but this research-rich report demonstrates that principals create optimum conditions for teaching and learning; principal evaluation systems can contribute to optimum conditions that strengthen instructional leadership.

This report is only the first step. Now that NAESP and NASSP have issued the findings in a special briefing for members of Congress and the media, the Association's work really begins. We're planning another multi-year initiative to develop resources that put the framework in the hands of district and state education leaders, superintendents, and other educators. We'll carry out this work in close collaboration with our state affiliates in our commitment to serve all principals, champion their interests, and honor their dedication to children. **■**

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