

From **EDUCATOR** to **ADVOCATE**

Using these simple, common sense strategies, principals can amplify their voices as advocates for students and schools at the local, state, and national levels.

By Mark Terry





The power of the principalship extends far beyond the boundaries of individual schools. Principals can make a difference on issues at the local, state, and national levels that affect learning communities. You may wonder how your one voice can make a difference, or you may think that you don't have time to invest in advocacy. If you follow the common sense approaches outlined in this article, you will quickly see the value of speaking up for your students and community, as well as your profession.

Most of us are looked up to in our communities, even though it might not seem that way some days. Your parents look to you as an expert in education. Members of local boards of education may also be parents in your school. Policies they pass often have immediate and direct impact on you, your school, and the students you serve.

You implement state laws passed by your legislators and decisions from your state boards of education or the state commissioner of education. Often, laws are passed with little thought of their potential consequences. Zero tolerance rules are an excellent example. Shouldn't common sense prevail when a six-year-old brings a pocket knife to school for show and tell?

When I think about the day-to-day matters that impacted teachers and students at the school where I served as principal, I realize that I spent a significant part of my day overseeing federal laws and regulations. Do you deal with ESEA, NCLB, AYP, IEP meetings, ELL provisions, or Common Core State Standards? Do Title I, Title II, Title III, or Title IX impact your school district and building finances? Is your state implementing teacher and principal evaluation systems related to U.S. Department of Education waivers, so your building isn't immediately impacted by federal sanctions? While we are influenced by local school politics and state regulations, Washington, D.C. has much more involvement than we often realize.

7 Simple Ways to Get Involved

You might be saying, "Okay, okay! I know that I should be speaking up, but when and how?" Here are seven steps you can take to get involved.

1 Determine the congressional district for yourself and for your school. Politicians

want to speak with constituents, the folks who vote them in or out of office. Your biggest influence is with those who represent you where you live. But, as a principal, you carry even more power. You have influence on the most important people in any congressional district: voters. This became crystal clear to me when I visited the office of a state representative and was rudely received by the legislative aide. She was about to send me packing without any explanation until I mentioned that my parents back home knew that I was at the Capitol to see the representative. Whoa! I ended up drinking coffee and talking education for 45 minutes with the congressman himself. Visit NAESP's Legislative Action Center to identify your federal legislators.

2 Get to know your legislators both at the state and national level. Start now!

Find out the committees on which they serve; where their offices are located; what school districts are in their congressional districts; and contact information such as phone numbers, email addresses, and mailing addresses. Visit their websites and look at their pictures. I once saw my congressman walking in my hometown's downtown area, and I thanked him for his service. He invited me to sit down for a cup of

Principals standing in front of the U.S. Capitol on Legislative Action Day during NAESP's most recent National Leaders Conference.



coffee and ended up visiting my school the next day. Most legislators are regular people who truly want to represent the folks back home well. None want to end up on a “worst legislator of the session” list.

3 Develop a working relationship with elected officials and their staff members. Send a congratulatory card to your representatives when they are elected. It doesn’t matter whether you voted for them or not. They will be making laws that can impact you for

years to come. You’ll be communicating with this person for two, four, or six years, or longer. It’s good to contact them early and often.

If you have an opportunity to visit your legislator at your state capitol or even in Washington, D.C., ask the legislative aide who greets you where he or she is from, what elementary school he or she attended, and where he or she currently attends school. You’ll often find that that person has a connection with you or with someone in your sphere of influence. It turns out that I have served as principal for several of the legislative aides I have met.

Email is the primary vehicle to communicate with legislative offices these days, but do not be afraid to follow up with thank you notes to the legislative aides and/or the legislator. Letters may take longer to get there, but recipients will remember you as “that principal who sends cards and letters.”

4 Photo opportunities are important to legislators. If you mention that a photo with the legislator would look great in the local paper, the office staff often can arrange a quick snapshot for your community or school newspaper. Once published, send a copy to the congressional office by email. Your legislator will find a print-quality photo helpful. Remember, it’s about developing a working relationship with the legislators and their staffs. Photos will help them remember you when you call to voice your opinion on an issue.

If you find out what elementary school the legislative aide attended, ask if you can take a photo of him or her so you can send it to his or her elementary principal and brag about the aide’s success. You will simultaneously honor the aide and make a connection with another principal in your area. How do you think you will be treated the next time you visit that office?

5 Prepare to share your opinion or story. After establishing relationships with legisla-

tors and their office staff, prepare to advocate for schools with a call or visit. Determine the law or regulation on which you’ll be speaking. Find out the bill number and make a few notes on what you want to say on a note card. I like to limit the information to four bullet points.

If you join NAESP’s Federal Relations Network, you will receive a synopsis of important legislation and suggested talking points by email. NAESP’s website also provides information on top advocacy issues organized by the legislative priorities of the current session of Congress. Your state organization likely provides the same type of information and legislative alert system.

6 Make the call. Rarely will you call and actually speak with the legislator. An aide or intern will usually handle the call. That person will want you to reference a bill number and will want to know if you support the legislation. Don’t forget to tell that person the name and location of the school you lead.

Then, talk about the top challenges you face in your school to improve teaching and learning, such as poverty or a high-mobility population. Tell the aide about the increased demands on principals related to federal regulations, and that principals—not just teachers—need support to be successful instructional leaders.

Do you doubt that your call will make a difference? Several sessions ago, our state legislature debated a bill that was particularly harmful to schools. Principals in the area received a legislative alert from our state organization, and we called our legislator’s office. Subsequently, she changed her vote from a “yea” to a “nay.” When I asked her why she changed her mind, she told me her office was flooded with calls. How many? Forty calls helped change her vote.

Follow up with an email message or a card thanking the legislator for the vote or for listening to your concerns, whether you got the desired outcome or not. Your opinions will be more



NAESP Advocacy Corner

NAESP is working to influence key policy and legislation that will support the principalship and the future of the profession. Following is a snapshot of bills in the 113th Congress the NAESP advocacy team is keeping track of, and key legislation that principals can engage representatives on to support the principalship.

- **Redirect Existing Funds to Support Principals in Title II of the ESEA.** NAESP has launched a request in Congress to prod states and districts to do a better job supporting principals with the funds they currently receive from Title II Part A of ESEA, as the law requires. Specifically, states and districts should spend at least 10 percent of Title II funds on high-quality professional development for principals; they currently only spend 4 percent or less of the total \$2.5 billion the federal government provides for professional learning opportunities for educators. NAESP is leading this effort with the American Federation of School Administrators and the National Association of Secondary School Principals. *(Ask your members of Congress to support funding for principals in Title II through the FY 2015 Senate Labor, HHS, Education appropriations bill.)*
- **School Principal Recruitment & Training Act.** Supports principals through capacity-building measures that will improve student academic achievement in high-need schools, including a strong emphasis on mentoring programs for principals. *(Ask your members of Congress to co-sponsor H.R. 1736/S. 840 to support principals.)*
- **Great Teaching and Leading for Great Schools Act.** Advances a research-based definition of professional development in ESEA, invests in the capacity of principals and teacher leaders to evaluate and provide professional learning for teachers, and supports evidence-based professional learning strategies for principals. *(Ask your members of Congress to co-sponsor H.R. 4269 to support principals.)*
- **Success in the Middle Act.** Authorizes investments to improve middle-level education in low-performing schools, allotting funding research on best practices to improve achievement in middle grades education. *(Ask your members of Congress to co-sponsor H.R. 2316/S.708 to support important legislation impacting middle level education.)*

For more information on these legislative priorities, including how to take action through NAESP's Legislative Action Center, visit naesp.org/advocacy.


out certificates to students, visit classrooms to explain how a bill is passed, and take photos with parents and students. I have even had a legislative aide visit me in my office surreptitiously to discuss an idea for possible legislation. All you need to do is ask, again and again.

I routinely ask my representative to have lunch with me in the community in which my school is located. The first time I invited a legislator to lunch, I was shocked that he accepted. Now, we have lunch when we can. While we don't always see eye-to-eye on education, we talk about the issues with mutual respect.

Make a connection with NAESP's Federal Relations Network and with your state organization. Together, they provide principals with valuable information about the issues that impact schools. These networks remind me that there are many like-minded principals in the field who care deeply for our profession and for public schools.

Continuing the Conversation

You can gain the ear of those who pass legislation that impacts your school in many ways. If you only do one thing, share your stories with your local, state, and national legislators. Often, they are waiting for someone to guide them on how to vote for a particular bill. That person can be you.

Let's continue the conversation. Share your ideas on how to influence our lawmakers regarding public education. They need to know that public education is one of the greatest institutions ever developed. Every child is accepted at the doors of America's public schools, no matter that child's economic standing, address, academic ability, or status as a citizen. We admit them all, we love them all, and we give them that chance to be successful in life. 

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Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: www.naesp.org/MayJun14

NAESP's advocacy Web page is the clearinghouse for **NAESP's advocacy priorities**. On it you can access ESEA reauthorization recommendations, resources on key issues such as teacher evaluation and E-Rate, and information about NAESP's Federal Relations Network, which provides members updates on the latest policy trends.

"Plan a Principal for a Day Program," from the *Communicator* archives, provides a planning checklist for hosting a shadow day at your school.

appreciated if you build a deeper relationship. Even if you just place a one- or two-minute call to voice your opinion and follow up with a card, you will be serving as an advocate for children.

7 Take the next steps. Now that you have broken the ice, move on to having more of an influence on the politics surrounding public education. Invite your state and national representatives to visit your school. You can do this by asking parents and/or community members who know your legislators to extend the invitation. I have had politicians from the state and national scene pass