

## **Rookie Principals' Group Sheds Light on Early-Career Challenges**

**Panel for new school leaders provides supports, data**

**By Denisa R. Superville**

In the months after Mike Carlson was hired as a middle school principal in the East Moriches district on the south shore of Long Island, N.Y., he found himself working between 60 and 70 hours a week.

His stress level was high, clocking in at a 9 on a 10-point scale, he said.

Carlson had a good relationship with his superintendent, who had been his principal in another district where Carlson was a teacher. But he was looking for a professional learning network made up of people like him who were new to the job of principal and navigating the ups and downs of the first few years.

He found that fellowship in the National Panel of New Principals, a nascent group of about 1,100 first- and second-year principals from across the country assembled by the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

The panel serves two main purposes: It's a supporting community for new principals, and it's a "real-time pulse" that the NAESP can tap for data to buttress its advocacy work and develop programs and resources for early-career principals.

### **Candid Feedback**

Last year, the NAESP polled the group on a wide range of topics: school safety, students' emotional health, technology, professional development for both principals and teachers, and their own readiness to lead schools that include pre-K. The principals on the panel shared what they were reading, strategies that were working in their schools, and other helpful information. Those tidbits, along with the survey results, were published online in a newsletter called ***Rise & Shine***.

The polling questions sought honest assessments on the challenges early-career principals face, including how prepared they were on the first day, their stress levels, and the number of hours they worked.

The survey results track some of what is already known about the profession: It's time-consuming and stressful. But it also offered some revealing insights: Only 18 percent of the new principals, for example, said they felt well prepared to help teachers integrate technology into the classroom.

In response to one question, 60 percent of principals said they thought they had been extremely well prepared or prepared for the job on the first day, while 40 percent felt either fairly prepared or not prepared.

Nearly half the new principals who took part in the panel led Title I schools, according to 2B Communications, the California-based communications and research outfit that helped the NAESP run the panel and conducted the polling. In the June poll, 45 percent of those who responded said they didn't plan to stay past five years. But overall, the principals also reported extremely high job satisfaction, with 80 percent saying that the job was very satisfying.

In the first survey of the group, last fall, 47 percent of the new principals who responded reported they had worked more than 60 hours a week the previous month, and 70 percent reported high stress levels.

“You see the results and you say, ‘Wow, I am not alone,’ “ said Carlson, who was appointed in 2013 to lead a school that had had five principals in the previous five years.

“It also makes you feel better that it’s not just Long Island,” he said, “but nationwide there are people who are feeling the same things or struggling with certain aspects, like safety, or wondering whether or not they were helpful enough as instructional leaders.”

### **III-Prepared for Prekindergarten**

Gail Connelly, the NAESP’s executive director, said that one of the “aha” findings was the high percentage of new principals who said they aren’t prepared to lead schools with prekindergarten programs.

While 53 percent of the panelists who responded said their schools house pre-K programs, and 65 percent said they were ultimately responsible for those children, only 1 in 5 felt well trained in instructional methods for early learners.

Even before the polling, the NAESP was focusing on how to help principals gain knowledge in practices that are relevant to preK-3 schools, but the results highlighted a glaring deficit in the field.

“There was a greater need than we had even realized,” Connelly said.

The NAESP took those results and the research it had amassed to help secure a \$1 million grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. The grant will be used to provide principals with professional development on early-childhood education, with an emphasis on early-career, minority principals, and those who serve at-risk students.

“It is encouraging us to focus even more deliberately on developing resources to support early-career principals,” Connelly said of the panel. “We are also gaining a better understanding of how we can differentiate support based on the context of the school setting.”

The NAESP had also noticed that its membership was rapidly changing as baby-boomer principals retired and the ranks filled with school leaders who are Gen Xers.

It wanted to find out more about this new breed of principals and what they needed to get the job done in an environment where expectations are constantly changing.

But it was also looking for current information to strengthen its advocacy work.

A study the group commissioned from 2B Communications showed that the NAESP might increase its impact on policymakers if, in addition to the wealth of research on school leadership it had at its disposal, it armed itself with “principals’ voices” and stories of the “day-to-day realities” of the job.

The association used the survey results and anecdotes from the panel, along with research, to push for residencies, stronger recruitment and induction, mentoring for early-career principals, and dedicated funding streams for principals' professional development—all of which made it into a bill recently passed by the U.S. Senate to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

“We may not have been successful if we had not been steeped in that data fresh from the field,” Connelly said.

Polling results were also shared with the U.S. Department of Education, in some cases as evidence for continuing specific programs.

## **Panel's Next Phase**

In the next cohort, the NAESP is looking to attract a larger share of the estimated 4,000 new principals who are hired each year.

In addition to being part of a learning community, the regular polling gave principals the opportunity to assess their own practices, said some leaders who participated.

“It gave [me] the chance to reflect, and take the time to say, ‘OK, this is how far we have grown since I started, or here are some things that I haven’t thought of yet, or here are some things that we need to improve on,’ “ said Rena Sabey, the principal of Rothschild Elementary School in Rothschild, Wis.

Carlson said the format allowed him to give honest assessments of the job, something he might not have felt comfortable doing while attending a regional conference, where everyone knows one another, or with the superintendent, who is also his boss.

He also liked seeing best practices from the field and learning from his peers. He intends to use some tips he got that principals can employ to get to know their teachers and students better, including co-teaching. He plans to encourage his students to join him on Google Classroom to work collaboratively on a math research paper that they can all present at a local college math fair.

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### NETWORK FOR NEW PRINCIPALS

The National Association of Elementary School Principals assembled a group of early-career elementary and middle school leaders to provide insights on the day-to-day realities of the job. Here are some highlights.



**TOTAL PARTICIPANTS**

### WHO WAS ON THE PANEL?



**GENDER**

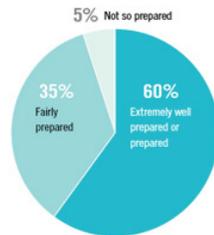
### AGE RANGES



### WHAT DID THEY SAY?

#### PREPAREDNESS

How prepared they were on the first day of the job:



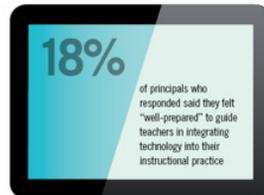
#### STRESS LEVEL



#### JOB SATISFACTION



#### TECHNOLOGY

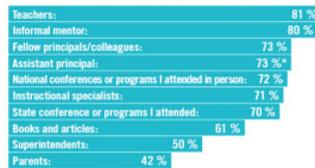


Principals who younger than 40 were more likely to say "lack of teacher comfort" was the major obstacle for effective use of technology in the classroom. Principals older than 40 were more likely to say it was "lack of teacher time."

#### FUTURE PLANS

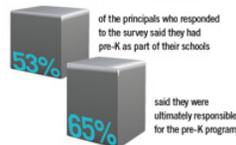


#### WHO HELPED THEM MOST?



\*We all schools had assistant principals.  
Note: The survey results are from the June 2015 report.

#### EARLY CHILDHOOD



Only **1 IN 5** of those who responded said they feel they were well-trained in "instructional methods and developmentally appropriate perspectives for early education"

