



# 2026 NAESP Legislative Agenda

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**A** whole child education provides a comprehensive set of supports so that each student is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. It creates the conditions for academic achievement, healthy youth development, and overall student success.

This framework provides policymakers and legislators with a clear, comprehensible, and systemic guide to help Pre-K-8 school leaders meet the academic, physical, and social-emotional development needs of all students so they can reach their full potential.

An elementary and middle school education is, by its very nature, a whole child education.

Pre-K-8 school principals work every day to create learning environments that nurture the academic and developmental needs of each student.

Policymakers can support these school leaders by providing resources, support, flexibility, and leadership to empower them to implement a whole child education at the school level

These legislative recommendations are part of a comprehensive strategy to promote student success, family engagement, and educator support along with the means to achieve it. We call on Congress and federal leaders to champion these priorities as investments in our nation's children and schools.

**“** *The mission of the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) is to lead in the advocacy and support for elementary and middle-level principals and other education leaders in their commitment for all children.* **”**

# Safe and Healthy

Physically and emotionally safe learning environments are foundational to student success and the foremost concern of school leaders. A school that is and feels safe to students, staff, and families fosters trust and learning. Beyond physical security measures, school leaders create nurturing environments that encourage creativity, self-expression, and authentic engagement. Access to essential health services and nutritious meals are critical components of this foundation, yet many schools lack these basic supports.

- **School nurses are critical health care professionals** who help create nurturing environments where students thrive, manage chronic conditions, dispense medication, and conduct screenings.
- **One-third of schools do not have a full-time nurse**, according to the National Association of School Nurses.
- **Only 56 percent** of rural schools have a full-time nurse.
- **Six percent** of American schools have no nurse at all.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends **a full-time registered nurse in every school**.
- **Families of four earning more than \$60,000 are not eligible for reduced price meals.**
- Students participating in the school meals program consume **more nutritious breakfasts and lunches** than their peers.
- Extensive research shows a **positive connection between school meals and the classroom**, with students participating in the program demonstrating improved attendance, behavior, and academic performance.
- Eight states—California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, New York, and Vermont—currently provide **universal school meals ensuring no student is hungry while in school**. But millions of other students do not have guaranteed access to nutritious meals to fuel their learning.



## NAESP Recommends to Congress

- ***The Nurses for Under-Resourced Schools Everywhere Act (NURSE Act), HR 3262***, would make demonstration grants to local school districts to increase the number of school nurses in high-need public schools. Co-sponsored by Reps. Dina Titus (D-NV) and Jen Kiggans (R-VA)
- ***The Healthy Meals Help Kids Learn Act, HR 5753***, would increase the reimbursement rates for school lunches by 45 cents and school breakfasts by 28 cents. Sponsored by Rep. Jim McGovern (D-MA)

# Supported and Engaged

The importance of an early and strong start to a child's education and development cannot be overstated. The foundation of student achievement and school success is established in the early years and the early grades. Students thrive when they receive comprehensive support and are actively engaged in their learning. A well-rounded education that includes physical education, art, music, recess, and extracurricular activities is essential to cognitive and emotional development. Strong school-family-community partnerships are also critical, as a student's success is deeply intertwined with their family and community context.



- **School counselors play vital roles** in Pre-K-8 education, contributing to both academic success and overall well-being by supporting social-emotional skills, academic strategies, school culture improvement, and collaboration with families and teachers.
- The **recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250:1**, but the **national average is 376:1**, with elementary and middle school ratios in the states ranging from 581:1 to 702:1.
- **Afterschool and extracurricular activities offer opportunities** for students to explore interests, enhance social skills, and develop leadership abilities, yet **many students lack access to these essential programs**.
- **Student and family engagement are key strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism** rates, which are on the decline but remain above pre-pandemic levels.
- **Quality preschool programs** provide the academic and social-emotional foundation for a strong start and students' long-term school success.
- **Children from Head Start programs are better academically prepared** when they enter kindergarten and graduate at higher rates, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research.
- **Head Start currently serves 800,000 children**, though many more are **eligible but cannot be served** because of capacity limits.

## NAESP Recommends to Congress

- **Expanding early childhood education** access to all 4-year-olds.
- **The Supporting the Mental Health of Educators and Staff Act HR 4120**, would help train educators in strategies to improve mental health and require federal sharing of evidence-based best practices to improve mental health and prevent suicide among educators. Original co-sponsors: Reps. Suzanne Bonamici (D-OR), Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA), Debbie Dingell (D-MI), Don Bacon (R-NE)
- **\$12.3 billion for Head Start/Early Head Start** in FY27.
- **\$1.38 billion for Title IV-A, Student Support and Academic Enrichment** Grants in FY27.
- **\$1.3 billion for Title IV-B, Nita Lowy 21st Century Community Learning Centers** grants in FY27.

# School Leadership

School leaders and classroom teachers are the two most important in-school factors influencing student achievement. School leaders are the instructional leaders of their schools, oversee all facets of school operations, administer federal funds, and are the bridge between the classroom and the district. Principals are the indispensable leaders for putting policy into practice and for the academic achievement, school improvement, and whole child strategies that occur.



- **Title II, Part A** (Supporting Effective Instruction State Grants) is the only source of **federal funding solely dedicated to supporting school leaders and educators**.
- **Title II funding provides training and development** for school leaders, enhancing their ability to support teachers and improve school performance.
- Funding is also **used by local school districts for the recruitment, training, and retention** of effective school leaders and educators to increase their numbers in the workforce.
- Leadership development under Title II contributes to **stronger, more effective school management**.
- **Supporting school leaders and educators in all facets** of the profession must be the paramount improvement strategy and investment priority for improving student outcomes. President Donald Trump's executive order on advancing artificial intelligence (AI) in education says that *"we must also invest in our educators and equip them with the tools and knowledge to not only train students about AI but also to utilize AI in their classrooms to improve educational outcomes. Professional development programs focused on AI education will empower educators to confidently guide students through this complex and evolving field."*
- **The rate of school leaders leaving the profession (8.5 percent)** is declining but still higher than before the pandemic (3.3 percent). Rural retirements (9.6 percent) are highest among locales and above the national average overall.

## NAESP Recommends to Congress

- **\$2.19 billion for Title II-A, Supporting Effective Instruction** state grants in FY27.
- **The Retaining Educators Takes Added Investment Now (RETAIN) Act, S.1676/HR 3308** would create a fully refundable tax credit for teachers, paraprofessionals, school-based mental health providers, and school leaders in Title I schools and for those working in a program funded by Head Start, Early Head Start, and Child Care and Development Block Grants. Original co-sponsors: Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Tina Smith (D-MN), Brad Schneider (D-IL) and Haley Stevens (D-MI)
- **The Keep Our Promise to America's Children and Teachers Act (PACT) S.303/HR 869** helps create a 10-year fiscal path to fully fund the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act and Title I. Original co-sponsors: Sens. Chris Van Hollen (D-MD), Michael Bennett (D-CO), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Cory Booker (D-NJ), Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), Dick Durbin (D-IL), Martin Heinrich (D-NM), Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Jack Reed (D-RI), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Chris Murphy (D-CT), Edward Markey (D-MA), Alex Padilla (D-CA), Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Tina Smith (D-MN), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA); Rep. Susie Lee (D-NV).