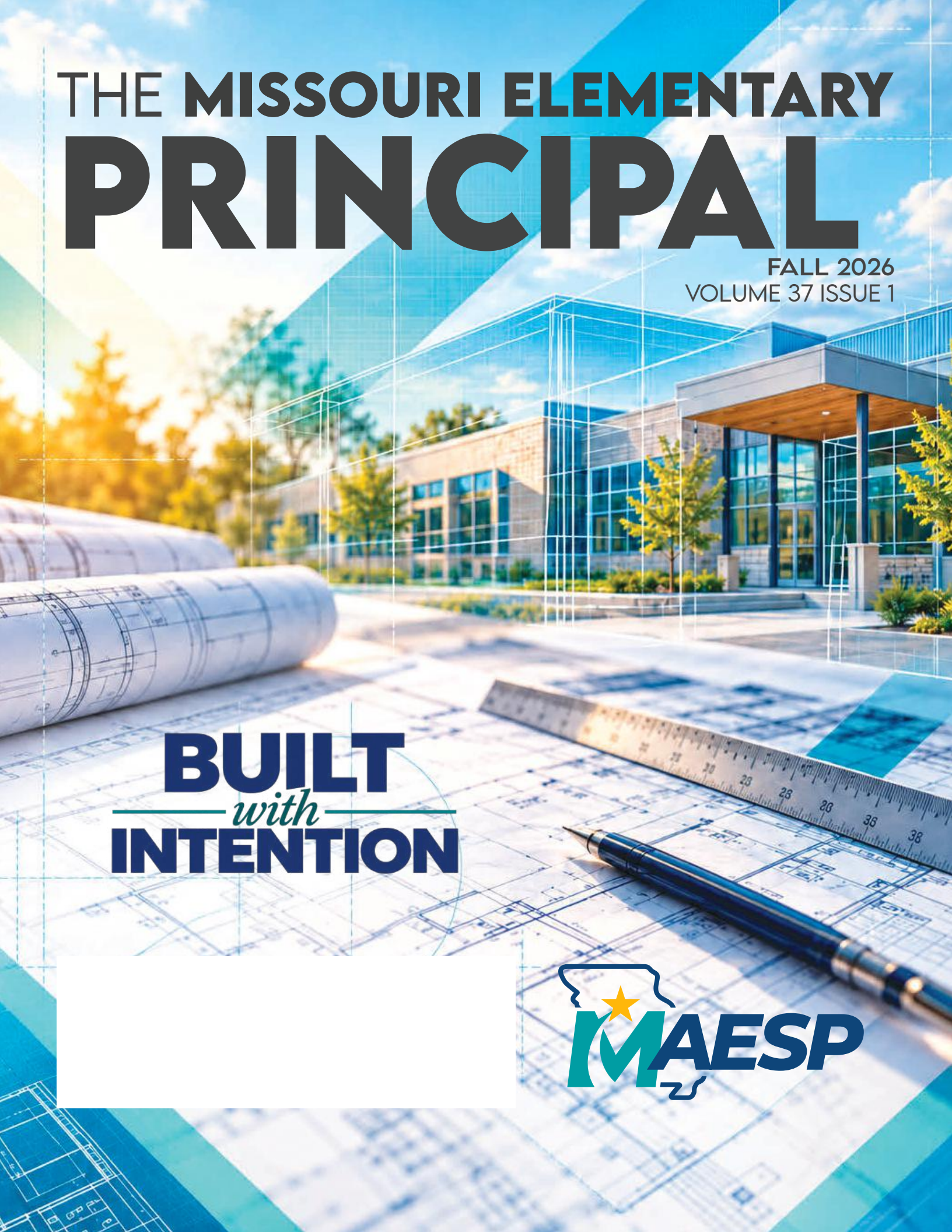
THE MISSOURI ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL

FALL 2026
VOLUME 37 ISSUE 1



BUILT *with* INTENTION

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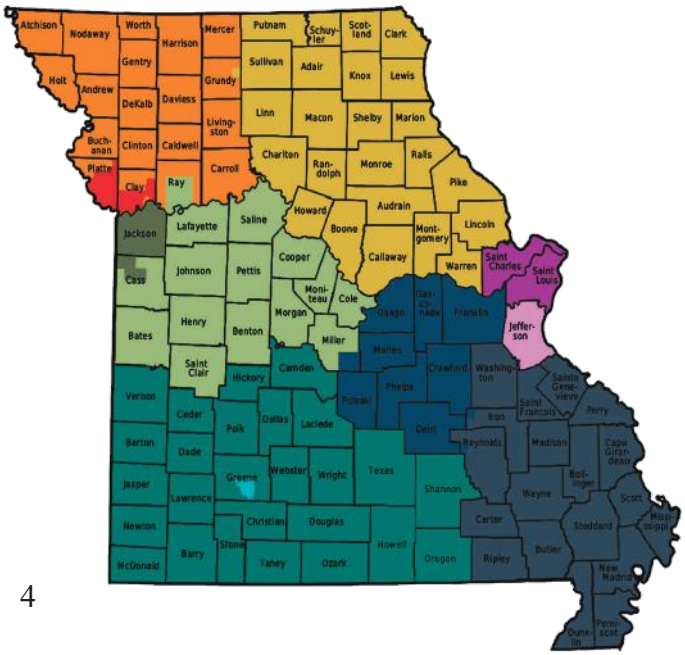
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Great schools don't happen by accident. They are built through purposeful decisions, meaningful relationships, and leaders who continually seek to grow. In this issue of The Missouri Elementary Principal, we explore what it means to lead with intention—not only in the schools we build, but in the leaders we become along the way.

Our contributors share personal reflections, practical strategies, and lessons learned through experience. From building a positive school culture and recognizing the value of staff to setting healthy boundaries and strengthening family partnerships, these articles remind us that intentional leadership is reflected in the everyday moments that shape our schools. You'll also find perspectives on personal growth, professional reflection, and the importance of leading with both purpose and heart.

Beyond these thought-provoking articles, this issue introduces MAESP's new online discussion forums, designed to help members connect, collaborate, and share ideas with colleagues across Missouri.

We're also looking ahead to the 2027 MAESP Leadership Conference, Built MAESP Strong, February 27–March 2 at Margaritaville Lake Resort in Osage Beach. Get a preview of our featured keynote speakers, learn how to submit a presenter proposal, and make plans to join us for this exciting professional learning opportunity.

You'll also find information about upcoming Aspiring Principals Workshops, the December 8 Legislator–Principal for a Day event, and a calendar of upcoming MAESP activities. Plus, discover how you can contribute your own experiences and insights to future issues of this magazine.

Whether you're looking for fresh ideas, opportunities to connect, or a moment to reflect on your own leadership journey, we hope these pages inspire you to continue building with intention—one decision, one relationship, and one day at a time.

Patrick R. Keenoy, Ph.D.
Principal Editor

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Executive Director
Dr. J Anderson

Principal Editor
Patrick R. Keenoy, Ph.D.

Design & Layout
Christine Wilson

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Missouri Association of Elementary School Principals
3550 Amazonas Drive
Jefferson City, MO 65109
573-638-2460
maesp@maesp.com
www.maesp.com

Change of Address:
members should notify MAESP of address changes by emailing maesp@maesp.com

Article Submissions:
letters, articles, and advertising inquiries may be submitted to Patrick Keenoy, Principal Editor, at pkeenoy@gmail.com

Advertising Inquiries:
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SHARPENED by the WORK

By Dr. J Anderson

There is a difference between building something intentionally and simply working hard on it. School leaders know how to work hard. We arrive early, stay late, carry the phone, answer the email, cover the class, solve the problem, attend the meeting, calm the parent, encourage the teacher, find the missing bus, and somehow get blamed when it rains during dismissal. Hard work has never been our shortage. But hard work and intentional work are not always the same thing.

When we chose **Built with Intention** as the theme for this issue, my first thoughts went to the things leaders build: culture, relationships, systems, strong teams, quality instructional programs. All of those matter. But perhaps we begin that conversation one step too late. Before we build any of those things, we are building the leader who will build them.

The School Leader Collaborative, of which MAESP is a member, uses a mantra I have come to appreciate: Becoming While Doing. Leadership is not simply the work we accomplish. It is also what happens to us while we accomplish it. We are building schools, developing people, solving problems, and creating systems. At the same time, all of that work is shaping us.

And shaping rarely happens without some friction. There is a reason we say iron sharpens iron. There is a reason the image of a refiner's fire has endured for centuries. Growth is not usually the product of everything going our way. Apparently, becoming our best selves requires more than having good intentions and a really organized calendar. The difficult conversation, the failed idea, the criticism that contains just enough truth to irritate us, the colleague who challenges our thinking - these can become the very things that sharpen us, if we let them.
That last part matters. Experience alone does not make us wiser. Some people have twenty years of experience. Others have one year of experience twenty



times. Becoming requires intention. It also requires enough humility not to take ourselves too seriously.

I increasingly admire leaders who can do important work without needing to look important while doing it. They can make a hard decision and still laugh at themselves. They can admit, "Well, that didn't work," without convening a task force to determine who else might be responsible. They are serious about the mission without being overly serious about themselves. I want more of that in my own leadership because schools have a way of reminding us that no matter our title, strategic plan, or years of experience, we remain wonderfully and imperfectly human.

We will miss things. We will say something poorly. We will occasionally walk confidently into the wrong meeting. And every once in a while, a kindergartner will provide a performance evaluation with a level of candor no superintendent would dare attempt. Maybe that is part of the refining, too.

Intentional leadership means paying attention not only to what we are building, but to who we are becoming while we build it. What kind of leader am I becoming when things get hard? Am I more curious than I was five years ago? More patient? More courageous? Can I change my mind without feeling diminished? Do people around me make me sharper—and do I do the same for them? Can I hold high expectations while extending grace? Can I laugh at myself, learn from the moment, and keep moving? Perhaps the most uncomfortable question is also the simplest: **Is the work making me better?**

We spend much of our careers trying to leave schools better than we found them. That is worthy and noble work. But I wonder if there is a companion responsibility: to allow the people, challenges, successes, failures, and even absurdities of leadership to leave us better than they found us.

There is something bigger at stake here than becoming more effective administrators. We get a remarkably brief opportunity to influence people. Teachers will remember whether we believed in them before they believed in themselves. Families will remember how we treated them when they were worried about their child. Children may never remember the improvement plan we spent three months writing (and, frankly, I hope they don't), but they will remember the adults who made school feel safe, joyful, challenging, and full of possibility.

So build the culture. Strengthen the systems. Develop your people. Improve instruction. Create things that last. But while you are doing all that building, pay attention to the construction happening a little closer to home. Find people who sharpen you. Don't run from every bit of heat. Hold tightly to your purpose and a little more loosely to yourself. Learn. Laugh. Adjust. Become.

Years from now, the most important thing we built may not be a program, a process, or even a school. It may be the people we helped others become—and the person we became along the way.



About the Author

Dr. J Anderson is the Executive Director of Missouri Association of Elementary School Principals.

Connect with Dr. Anderson:

Email: janderson@maesp.com

X/Twitter: @DrJ_Anderson

BUILT MAESP STRONG

2027 Leadership Conference

FEBRUARY 27 - MARCH 2, 2027

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Reserve by January 28, 2027 to receive the MAESP group rate.

MEET OUR KEYNOTE SPEAKERS



SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28

PHIL JANUSZEWSKI

Phil Januszewski is a highly sought-after, dynamic speaker who resides in Chicagoland and speaks to adult givers. A proud former high school Chemistry and Physics teacher of 20 years, he holds a degree in Chemistry, a Master's in Teaching Leadership, and a positive education certification. Phil's love of entertaining people began in high school. After years of drumming in garage bands, announcing sporting events, and DJing weddings, he now speaks to the "givers" in the world who are looking to be less tired and more inspired!

When Phil is not speaking, he enjoys everyday adventures with his wife and two children or pursuing his passions for physical fitness, cooking/baking new recipes, getting tattooed, screaming to metal music, and reading about self-improvement and positive psychology.

If you ever meet Phil, be prepared for a great deal of genuine positive energy and enthusiasm!



MONDAY, MARCH 1

MERLYNA VALENTINE

Merlyna Valentine's heart beats with passion for living a purposeful life. An educator for 30 years, she has dedicated her life to making a difference for others. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education and a Master of Education in Educational Leadership and belongs to numerous professional organizations.

Ms. Valentine has served as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, and Executive Director of Elementary Schools for a high-performing district. Her numerous awards and commendations include Teacher of the Year, Principal of the Year, and Louisiana Regional Principal of the Year. She has been featured in local and national articles and news stories, including an article by the renowned Dr. Harry K. Wong. In honor of her story of survival, courage, and hope, Ms. Valentine was featured on the Today Show and in Ebony Magazine.



TUESDAY, MARCH 2

DAMON WEST

Damon West, M.S. in Criminal Justice, is a college professor, keynote speaker, four-time bestselling author, and formerly incarcerated individual sentenced to life for organized crime. USA Today calls him the "modern day Shawshank Redemption and the most in-demand speaker in America." After graduation, he worked in Congress and trained as a stockbroker for United Bank of Switzerland (UBS). At UBS, he was introduced to methamphetamines and became instantly hooked. His choices to feed his addiction forever changed many innocent lives.

During his incarceration, a fateful discussion with a seasoned convict sparked a spiritual awakening. Damon learned that, like a coffee bean changing with heat and pressure, he could change the environment around him. Armed with a program of recovery, renewed faith, and a miraculous second chance at life, Damon emerged from over seven years in prison a changed man. His story is one of hope, redemption, grit, and the resilience of the human spirit.

PRESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

STARTING *with* INTENTION

By Dalania Watson

As I settle into my office after a summer reset, I see many opportunities for a fresh start. However, after nine years of sitting in the principal's chair, I see fewer reasons for a fresh start and more reason for an intentional start. Many of us get a few weeks off to reset, but like most, I am sure our brains flip school years sometime near the end of May. We begin thinking about goals, themes, and schedules. I feel safe saying the "Sunday scaries" start in August. Teachers begin to feel the summer days and nights slipping away as our emails start entering their inboxes. However, this does not have to be doom and gloom; it can be an intentional bloom into a new year.

How do we avoid the scaries? Remember who and what you needed when you started the school year as a teacher. Don't forget that the one thing we can give them that costs us $0 is time. Allow them time to be intentional in their classrooms and prepare for the most important part of school: the students. Don't overthink your plans for professional development—keep them relevant and authentic. If you are in your first year, focus on building relationships that serve your staff, not just your own agenda. Use this time to find out what they need—whether it's cutting out bulletin board items, hanging a poster, or providing a second set of eyes on a seating chart.

Elementary teachers are very intentional about starting their year, and we need to protect that time. There will be time for fun PD games once the school year has started. There will be time for icebreakers like Two Truths and a Lie, but there is never enough time before the first day of school, let alone Open House. Make PD intentional and beneficial for your staff. Don't add fluff just to fill an agenda—ask yourself how they can actually use it in their role or classroom.

I am guilty of having used time-consuming agenda items in the past. But after years of leadership and courageous conversations, I now know that what teachers want more than anything else is intentionality and trust—trusting them with what they need to do before day one.

Our school days are long, but the years are short. Enjoy them and celebrate often. As the president of MAESP, I ask you to be intentional about inviting principals to regional meetings and conferences—it is one of the best ways to connect and grow in our own roles.



About the Author

Mrs. Dalania Watson serves as the 2026–2027 President of MAESP. She is the principal of Telegraph Intermediate School in the Jefferson R-VII School District.

Connect with Dalania:

Email: watsond@jr7.k12.mo.us

X/Twitter: @dwatts1155

2027 LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

CALL FOR PRESENTER PROPOSALS

FEBRUARY 27 - MARCH 2, 2027

MARGARITAVILLE LAKE RESORT | OSAGE BEACH, MISSOURI

MAESP is seeking session presenters for the 2027 MAESP Leadership Conference. We are looking for practical, relevant learning that helps hundreds of PK–8 principals and assistant principals lead stronger schools, support their people, and meet the challenges in front of them. Your knowledge, experience, and tools matter. What are you doing that other school leaders could learn from?

PROPOSAL DEADLINE: DECEMBER 8, 2026

SUBMIT YOUR PROPOSAL

SCAN TO SUBMIT or visit MAESP.COM/PRESENTER-PROPOSAL

POSSIBLE SESSION TOPICS

Here are some ideas. Other practical leadership topics are welcome.

- Student Behavior, Engagement & Belonging
- Attendance & Re-Engagement
- Screen Time, Devices & Human-Centered Learning
- AI & the Changing Learning Landscape
- Instructional Leadership & HQIM
- Special Education Leadership & Inclusion
- Growing, Supporting & Keeping Great People
- Mentoring, Coaching & Growing Leaders
- Family & Community Partnership
- Data, Assessment & Continuous Improvement
- Student Wellness, Mental Health & Resilience
- Safety, Crisis & Student Supports
- Operations, Time & Smarter Systems
- Early Childhood & Early Learning Leadership
- Middle-Level Leadership
- Rural & Small-School Leadership
- Communication, Trust & Telling Your School's Story

Topics are not limited to this list. Share your expertise and expand our leadership capacity.

TIPS FOR PRESENTERS: Be Practical | Be Evidence-Based | Be Collaborative.

MAESP DISCUSSION FORUMS



A Room Full of People Who Get It

There is a particular kind of conversation that happens when principals get together. Someone begins with "Have any of you ever dealt with..." and before the question is finished, heads start nodding. Someone has dealt with it. Usually several someones. One person offers an idea. Another shares what didn't work. Someone else asks a question that changes how everyone thinks about the problem.

And for a few minutes, nobody has to explain what it is like to be a principal. Everyone in the room already knows.

THAT MATTERS MORE THAN WE SOMETIMES ACKNOWLEDGE.

Research into principal professional learning continues to point toward the value of learning with other school leaders. A recent Wallace Foundation report found that principals particularly value opportunities for social learning and collaboration. Networks, conversations, and coaching were among the approaches principals found useful, and principals described professional networks as a way to connect with peers and reduce the isolation that can come with the job.

NAESP has made a similar case for years. Professional networks do more than provide contacts. They expose principals to people working through similar challenges, different approaches, new resources, and occasionally the reassuring discovery that the strange thing happening in your building is apparently happening everywhere.

THAT IS PART OF WHAT A PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION SHOULD PROVIDE.

MAESP can offer conferences, professional learning, advocacy, publications, mentoring, resources, and a long list of other benefits. All of those matter. But perhaps one of the most valuable things an association can provide is much simpler: access to other people who understand the work.

Our members told us that, too. In our recent member survey, principals asked for more opportunities for online discussion, resource sharing, principal forums, networking, and year-round engagement. We listened.

This fall, MAESP is beginning to use the discussion forum available within our membership platform. We have created spaces for our Regional Presidents and individual forums for MAESP's regions, with the opportunity to expand into other groups and areas of interest as we learn what members find most useful.

The technology itself isn't particularly exciting. It's a discussion board. The internet figured those out somewhere between dial-up modems and AOL telling us we had mail.

WHAT EXCITES ME IS WHAT CAN HAPPEN INSIDE IT.

A principal in one corner of Missouri can post a question on Tuesday night and hear from another principal who faced the same issue last year. Someone can share a resource without sending it through another school email listserv. A new principal can ask a question they may not yet feel comfortable asking locally. An experienced principal can share something learned through twenty years of getting it right, getting it wrong, and figuring out the difference.

We also want these forums to feel different from much of the online world. They are professional MAESP spaces built on trust. We expect members to protect the identities of students, employees, families, and others when discussing situations. We can disagree without becoming disagreeable. We can challenge ideas while supporting people. And we will ask members to keep the room in the room - to not screenshot, forward, copy, or attribute another member's comments outside the forum without permission.

That trust matters because meaningful professional connection requires more than access to people. It requires a place where people feel comfortable saying, "I'm not sure what to do here."

School leadership provides plenty of places where principals are expected to have the answer. A strong professional association should also provide a few places where it is perfectly acceptable to have the question.

That may be the real opportunity in front of us. We aren't simply creating another communication channel. We are creating another room for Missouri principals to find one another.

AND SOMETIMES, THE MOST HELPFUL THING IN LEADERSHIP IS WALKING INTO A ROOM FULL OF PEOPLE WHO GET IT.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Important: You must be logged in and have an active MAESP membership to see the Forums menu option or access the Forums page.

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3. Once you are logged in, select Forums from the website menu bar, or go directly to www.maesp.com/Forums.
4. Choose a forum from the list and join the conversation!

FORGOT YOUR PASSWORD?

Click Forgot Password on the login screen and enter the email address associated with your MAESP membership. Follow the instructions sent to your email to reset your password.

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573-638-2460

RESEARCH IN ACTION:

TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL IEP MEETING

By Dr. Nathan Kingery

A central tenet of being human is the need to protect and provide for our children, so it is easy for parents to deny a need for help or become defensive.



IEP meetings are an integral part of what we do as school leaders. Often, we follow the prescriptive path to the completion of the meeting and consider it a success if it's finished within the allotted time and parents don't voice any concerns. It's easy to rush through the present level and fire off a list of general accommodations and modifications like it's business as usual. What we often fail to consider, though, is the impact these meetings have on the parents involved.

Of the multitude of meetings that make up our days, I believe IEP meetings are among the most profoundly personal meetings we face. Each meeting requires parents to sit alone in a room full of experts and listen to evidence that their child is not typical. Whether they are hearing this information for the very first time or finally getting help they've been pushing for, parents are required to admit their child needs help beyond what they can provide. A central tenet of being human is the need to protect and provide for our children, so it is easy for parents to deny a need for help or even become defensive when evidence of a disability is presented.

Besides the often-jaded attitude of members of the IEP team, parents cite multiple reasons for dissatisfaction with the IEP process, including a disconnect in home-school communication, use





of technical jargon in meetings, and the belief that services and placement were predetermined by members of the IEP team (Carlson et al., 2020; McKenna et al., 2024).

However, when parents feel like they are valued, integral members of the IEP team, their satisfaction with the special education services provided increases (Sanderson & Goldman, 2023). Parent satisfaction also increases when IEP meetings focus on the strengths of students and when they feel their voices are heard and their opinions matter (Carlson et al., 2020).

During my doctoral research, I had the honor of speaking with parents about their perspectives on IEP meetings, and I have a few suggestions that could help make these meetings more impactful and comfortable for parents. This requires school leaders to set up specific expectations and protocols for the IEP team.

First, all school-based members of the IEP team need to eliminate educational jargon and talk to parents using language they understand. This also

includes eliminating acronyms until the full term has been used enough that parents have a clear understanding. When I think back to my time as a music teacher before becoming an assistant principal, I had next to no knowledge of what happened in the special education world. Outside of my coursework on exceptional learners and the occasional scale to fill out for individual students, I never truly understood the complexities of special education. If these meetings are complicated and sometimes convoluted for educators, imagine how hard it would be as a parent without any formal training.

Second, all schools should work to develop "walk-out" protocols. During interviews with parents as part of my research, multiple parents mentioned how uncomfortable it was at the end of an IEP meeting to leave the room after hearing about their child's deficiencies, watch the door close behind them, and walk to the exit alone. These parents discussed how they imagined the whole team sitting there, talking about them and their child, especially after contentious meetings.

By developing specific protocols for the end of each meeting, schools can help bridge the school-home divide by ensuring parents feel comfortable with the outcome of the meeting. The IEP team should designate specific members to walk the parent to the door after the meeting. Along the way, this member should ask defined questions, including:

"How are you feeling after the meeting?"
"Do you have any lingering questions?"
"When is a good time for me (or another member of the team) to reach out to you on Thursday afternoon? I'm sure you'll have some questions, and we want you to feel comfortable and confident with what we decided today."

Small steps such as these show parents that we truly care about their child and their experience with the school. When we recognize and acknowledge the weight that IEP meetings carry for parents, we are one step closer to establishing strong family-school partnerships. Leading with intentionality requires us to consider the impact of our actions, no matter how common they feel. Every time we show a parent they matter, a ripple of hope moves out from our buildings.



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About the Author
Dr. Nathan Kingery is the Principal of Bloomsdale Elementary in the Ste. Genevieve R-II School District.

Connect with Dr. Kingery:
nkingery@sgdragons.org

UPCOMING EVENTS

NOVEMBER 2026 - JANUARY 2027

NOVEMBER 2026

05
WE Book Study

10
MAESP Field Trip - Early Childhood Leadership in Action
WE Book Study

20
Aspiring Leaders Workshop - Jefferson County

DECEMBER 2026

03
MAESP Executive Committee Meeting
WE Book Study

08
Legislator - Principal for a Day
Deadline to Submit Presenter Proposal
WE Book Study

JANUARY 2027

07
WE Book Study

12
WE Book Study

Events are current as of publication. For the most up-to-date details, visit maesp.com.



THE WORK OF BECOMING

Building Ourselves with Intention

By Dr. Patrick Keenoy

"Know Thyself."

Two simple words. Yet in a profession that requires us to know our students, our staff, our data, our communities, and seemingly everything happening in our buildings, how often do we make time to know ourselves?

The ancient Greek maxim "Know thyself," inscribed at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, has endured for centuries. Perhaps that is because knowing ourselves sounds simple but can be remarkably difficult - particularly in a profession that rarely gives us much time to stop and reflect.

As principals, we spend a great deal of time thinking about what we are building.

We work to build schools where students learn at high levels. We build systems that keep students safe. We work to create cultures where students and adults feel a sense of belonging and where their well-being matters. We build collaborative teams, develop processes, establish goals, analyze data, and continually look for ways to make our schools better.

All of that work matters.

But as we work to intentionally build better schools, how often do we remember to intentionally build ourselves?

The work of a principal can make that difficult. There is always another email to answer, another conversation to have, another problem to solve, and another decision to make. Even on the best-planned



days, something unexpected inevitably finds its way onto our desks.

It is easy to spend an entire day responding. And then another. Before long, we can become very good at managing what is immediately in front of us without taking enough time to think about who we are becoming as leaders.

I know I can.

I have ideas about the kind of school I want to help create. I want a collaborative culture. I want teachers working together and learning from one another. I want students to know that the adults in their school care about them and believe they can be successful. I want our school to be a place where learning, belonging, and well-being are more than words. I want them to be evident in what we do every day.

But building that kind of school requires more than developing the right structures or implementing the right programs. It requires something from me as a leader.

It requires me to know myself.

Remembering My Purpose

A few months ago, I was reading about Basil Moreau, a 19th-century cleric and educator. One idea I encountered in his writing was the importance of educating both the mind and the heart. Moreau noted that "we shall always place education side by side with instruction; the mind will not be cultivated at the expense of the heart" (p. 237).

That idea stayed with me.

It caused me to think about my own purpose as an educator and as a principal. Certainly, my responsibility is to help create the conditions in which children learn. But education has always been about more than academic achievement alone. The children who walk into our schools each morning are people. So are the adults who teach them.

Leading a school, then, is work of both the mind and the heart.

The challenge is remembering that at 10:17 on a Tuesday morning, when three things have gone wrong, someone is waiting outside the office, emails are accumulating in the inbox, and the carefully planned day has disappeared.

Those are the moments when intention matters most.

When I am moving quickly from one situation to the next, am I listening or simply waiting for my opportunity to respond?

When someone brings me a problem, am I immediately trying to fix it, or am I taking time to understand it?

When I walk through the hallway, am I thinking about the next place I need to be, or am I noticing the people who are right in front of me?

When I make a decision, am I simply resolving today's issue, or am I helping build the culture I say I want?

Those questions require me to slow down.

Creating Space to Think

Slowing down can feel counterintuitive in school leadership. There is too much to do.

Yet I am beginning to believe that slowing down does not mean doing less. Sometimes it means creating enough space to make sure that what I am doing actually reflects what I believe.

One thing I have learned about myself is that I have not always taken as much time as I should when making decisions. I wanted to be right, resolve the situation, and move on to whatever needed my attention next. But I have come to recognize that in my hurry to reach a decision, I have not always fully considered different points of view or the unintended consequences of that decision.

Knowing myself means recognizing the way I have operated in the past. It means slowing down, taking time to listen, asking another question, and being willing to sit with a situation a little longer before deciding what comes next.

That space does not have to come from an elaborate leadership retreat or hours of uninterrupted reflection. It may mean taking a few quiet minutes before the school day begins. In fact, I have started writing reminders at the start of the day about my purpose as an educator and what I want to keep in mind when talking with people about the work and when making decisions. It may mean walking away from the computer and getting into classrooms. It may mean asking one more question before offering an answer. Most importantly, it means remembering my purpose. The more clearly I understand what I value and who I want to be, the better prepared I am to make intentional choices when the day becomes anything but predictable.



The School We Build Begins With Us

There is a certain irony in school leadership. We spend our careers encouraging growth in others. We ask students to learn. We ask teachers to reflect on their practice. We encourage teams to collaborate, examine results, and continually improve.

We should expect the same of ourselves.

Mel Robbins and David Gerbitz write that "the more you understand yourself, the better you can manage your impulses and emotions at the moment." I am coming to believe that when we truly know ourselves, we can be the leader we are meant to be.

The schools we lead will never be shaped by our words alone. They will be shaped by the hundreds of small decisions we make each day - how we respond when someone disagrees with us, whether we truly listen, how we treat people when we are frustrated, where we spend our time, and what we choose to notice.

Those decisions reveal what we value far more clearly than anything written in a strategic plan.

Perhaps that is why those ancient words still matter.

Know thyself.

If we want to build schools with intention, we first have to build ourselves with intention.

For me, that means continuing to slow down, reflect, and remember why I chose this work in the first place. It means cultivating both the mind and the heart. It means recognizing that becoming the principal I want to be is not something I will eventually accomplish.

It is work I have to choose every day.

And that is where intentional leadership begins.



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About the Author

Patrick R. Keenoy, Ph.D., is principal of Rogers Elementary School in the Mehlville School District and Principal Editor of The Missouri Elementary Principal. He has served as principal of Rogers Elementary since 2013.

Connect with Dr. Keenoy

Email: pkeenoy@msdr9.com.
X/Twitter: @Principal_RES

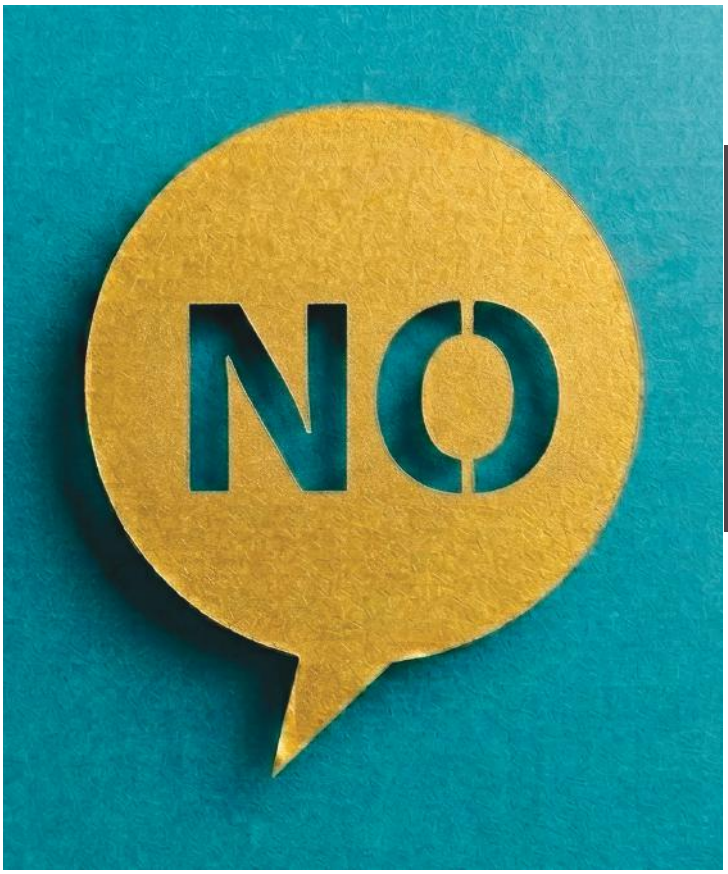
THE LEADERSHIP LESSON I LEARNED THE HARD WAY: **LEARNING TO SAY NO**

By Dr. Anne Billington

I learned one of my most important leadership lessons the hard way: you cannot say yes to everything and still lead effectively or live to see retirement.

I only taught for three years before moving into school leadership. My leadership journey happened quickly. I spent one year as an assistant principal, moved into the principalship, and then transitioned into an elementary education director role. At the same time, I was completing my doctorate, commuting, and raising three children.

I said yes to almost everything.



If someone needed help, I helped. If there was a problem, I wanted to fix it. If something needed to be done, I often found myself thinking, "I'll just take care of it."

I thought that was what a good leader did.

Over time, I realized that constantly being the problem solver and the "fixer" wasn't necessarily good leadership. In fact, it could prevent other people from growing. When I stepped in and solved every problem, I was often taking away an opportunity for someone else to develop the skills and confidence to solve it themselves.

Eventually, saying yes to everything caught up with me.

> Saying no does not mean you are unwilling to help.

I had to learn that having boundaries does not mean that you care less. Saying no does not mean that you are unwilling to help. And delegating does not mean that you are avoiding responsibility.

Sometimes, saying no is the most responsible thing a leader can do.



SOMETIMES, SAYING NO IS THE MOST RESPONSIBLE THING A LEADER CAN DO



FROM FIXER TO CAPACITY BUILDER

One of the biggest shifts in my leadership was moving from being a problem solver to a capacity builder.

Instead of immediately asking, “How can I fix this?” I began asking:

- Who can help solve this?
- What can this person learn from this situation?
- What support do they need from me?
- How can I empower them to handle this independently next time?

That shift wasn’t easy. I struggle daily in my personal and professional life.

As leaders, we often receive praise for being the person who can get things done. We become the person everyone calls when something goes wrong. It can feel good to be needed.

But if everything depends on you, you haven’t built a strong system—you’ve built a system that depends on one person.

Our goal as leaders should not be to make ourselves indispensable. Our goal should be to build the capacity of the people around us.

BOUNDARIES ARE LEADERSHIP

I also learned that boundaries are not selfish. They are necessary.

A leader who is constantly overwhelmed cannot consistently be the leader their staff and students need. We have to protect our time, our energy, our families, and our ability to think clearly.

Learning to say, "I can't take that on right now," was difficult for me.

So was saying, "This is something you can handle."

But those statements became some of the most important leadership phrases I learned.

There will always be another problem to solve. Another meeting to attend. Another person who needs help. Another initiative that sounds important.

The question isn't whether we can do it all.

The question is whether we should.



WHAT I WOULD TELL NEW PRINCIPALS

If I could go back and give my younger leadership self one piece of advice, it would be this:

You don't have to prove your value by how much you can carry.

Your value as a leader isn't measured by how many problems you personally solve. It is measured by how effectively you develop people, build systems, create trust, and improve the organization.

Learn to say no.

Know your boundaries.

Delegate.

Trust your people.

And don't confuse being needed with being effective.

The best leaders don't create organizations where everyone needs them.

They create organizations where everyone has the capacity to lead.

You don't have to prove your value by how much you can carry.



About the Author

Dr. Anne Billington currently serves as the Principal at McMillan Early Learning Center (8 years). She has 21 years of administrative experience in addition to 5 years of national sales.

Connect with Dr. Billington:

Email: abillington@mexico.k12.mo.us

Share Your Wisdom
Write for MAESP Magazine

By Dr. Patrick Keenoy

It is an honor to serve as the new Principal Editor of The Missouri Elementary Principal. As a practicing elementary principal, I know how quickly our days move. There is always another meeting to attend, problem to solve, decision to make, or conversation to have. In the midst of that work, we don't always take the time to reflect on what we are learning—or to share those lessons with others.

I hope this magazine can provide a place for us to do both.

One thing I have always appreciated about our profession is how much we can learn from one another. Some of the best ideas I have brought back to my own school did not come from a textbook or a formal presentation. They came from conversations with other educators who were willing to share what they were trying, what was working, what wasn't working, and what they had learned along the way. The MAESP Leadership Conference is another great opportunity to continue that learning and connect with educators from across our great state.

That's what I hope The Missouri Elementary Principal continues to be: a place where Missouri school leaders learn from one another.

As Principal Editor, I encourage you to consider contributing to the magazine. You don't need to consider yourself a writer, and you don't need to have all the answers. You simply need to have an experience, idea, practice, or perspective that might help another educator.

Perhaps your school has found a meaningful way to strengthen student belonging. Maybe your team has improved its PLC process, built stronger relationships with families, approached student learning differently, or developed a practice that has made your school better. You might even have learned something from an initiative that didn't go as planned. Those experiences have value.

Our work can sometimes feel isolating, but it becomes less so when we share it.

In each issue, I hope we can feature voices from principals and educators across Missouri—different schools, communities, experiences, and perspectives. My role as editor is not simply to fill pages. I want to help create a magazine that reflects the knowledge, challenges, successes, and experiences of the people doing this work every day.

So, as you read this issue, I invite you to think about your own story. What have you learned that another educator might benefit from hearing?

If something comes to mind, I hope you'll consider sharing it with us. Your experience may be exactly what another principal needs to read.

Interested in Contributing?

The Missouri Elementary Principal welcomes articles from educators who have ideas, experiences, strategies, and stories to share with colleagues across Missouri.

Articles may be submitted at any time to Dr. Patrick Keenoy, Principal Editor, at pkeenoy@gmail.com.

Submission Deadlines: Winter 2027: December 1, 2026 Spring 2027: April 1, 2027

Missouri Association of Elementary School Principals

2026–2027 Membership Form

MEMBER INFORMATION

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LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

☐ I would like to include registration fee of $399 for the 2027 Leadership Conference (February 27 – March 2, 2027).

TOTAL

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Membership dues to Missouri Association of Elementary School Principals are not tax deductible as charitable contributions for income tax purposes. However, they may be tax deductible as ordinary and necessary business expenses subject to restrictions imposed by the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993 as a result of association lobbying activities. Missouri Association of Elementary School Principals estimates that the nondeductible portion of your 2026 dues which is allocated to lobbying activity is 13%.

Notice. See. *Love.*

How to Build up Staff with Intention & Purpose

By Abby Hathcock

I've always had a passion for people-watching. Sitting at the mall in the late 90s with my Orange Julius and a recent purchase of discounted shoes from Montgomery Ward really helps a person think. Whether a group of misunderstood friends were walking into Hot Topic or a family was headed to the photo studio of JCPenney's, connection was always the motive. A sense of belonging, the feeling of connection, and the desire to be seen and noticed are part of human nature. Teachers don't leave the profession because it's hard; they leave due to feeling invisible. Research confirms that perceived administrator support is the lens through which teachers evaluate their entire working environment. When a principal makes a habit of highlighting the good, it shifts a teacher's perspective from surviving the week to feeling connected to their purpose.

As building leaders, how well are we fostering opportunities for our staff to be noticed, seen, and loved? True appreciation goes beyond donuts in the workroom. I love a cutesy theme and pun-intended snack joke like the next Unicorn Principal, but when all the pretty colors and snack wrappers get thrown in the trash, what are your staff left with? Genuine appreciation and the feeling of a full soul or a hollow sense of self-worth and a full tummy? It's about truly seeing people, noticing their value, and loving them enough to tell them. Tangible investment takes tangible time. As we know, the principalship provides ample amounts of time to complete all of our continuous & urgent tasks in a timely manner; sarcasm intended and sarcasm noted. So, how can we, as effective building administrators, create a system to fall back on when the demands of managerial leadership get too high?

Scan the QR code and access a few procedures and systems to help lessen the leadership load when wanting to celebrate staff in a specific way. Whether it's staff connection, staff recognition, showing gratitude, or getting ideas on fun morale boosters, there's bound to be a little nugget you can take back to your building to try this fall. Not all noticings have to cost money and not all noticings have to take up a massive amount of time. Find what works for you, your leadership style, and your own staff, and get 1% better each day by writing a few "I notice you…" statements for your people.

It's not the early 2000s anymore and Spencer's Gifts is long forgotten, BUT there is value in that Mall-Watching Mindset; grab a cheese stick and a handful of almonds for your "lunch" and pick a corner of a hallway to simply people-watch in your building. Do we notice people investing in students? Do we see the good in our staff within a tough situation? Do we care about them and love them enough to celebrate those wins with them? Simon Sinek tells us, "Leadership isn't about being in charge, it's about taking care of the people in your charge."



About the Author

Mrs. Abby Hathcock serves as the Springfield Region Public Relations Representative. She is the Principal at Sequiota Elementary School in the Springfield Public Schools School District.

Connect with Abby:

Email: amhathcock@spsmail.org

Built with Intention: Choosing to Be the One

By Shalyn Howe

As principals, we spend a great deal of time thinking about what we are building. We build master schedules, leadership teams, school improvement plans, intervention systems, and professional learning opportunities. We spend hours making decisions that we hope will improve outcomes for students and create the best possible environment for staff.

But as I reflected on this year's MAESP Fall theme, Built with Intention, I couldn't help but think about something much bigger than the systems we build. I thought about the culture we build. The truth is, every school has a culture. The question isn't whether one exists—it's whether we're intentionally building the one we want. This year, our school adopted the theme "Be the One." While it began as a simple phrase to encourage our staff, it has challenged me personally as a leader.

Every morning, I ask myself a simple question:
Who needs me to be the one today?

Maybe it's the kindergartner walking through the doors with tears in their eyes.

Maybe it's the first-year teacher wondering if she's cut out for this profession.

Maybe it's the veteran teacher carrying a burden no one else knows about.

Maybe it's the parent who simply needs someone to listen.



Leadership isn't found only in board meetings, budgets, or data discussions. Some of our greatest leadership moments happen in the hallway, at morning drop-off, in a classroom doorway, or during a five-minute conversation between meetings. Those moments may seem small. But culture is built in the small moments.

As principals, we are the architects of our school's climate. Every interaction lays another brick in the foundation we're building. Every conversation either strengthens trust or weakens it. Every decision communicates what we value.

If we want our schools to be places where students feel safe, we must intentionally create safety. If we



want teachers to take instructional risks, we must intentionally create trust. If we want kindness to define our culture, we must intentionally model kindness. Culture doesn't happen by accident. It is built with intention.

I've learned that being "the one" doesn't require extraordinary leadership. More often, it requires ordinary moments handled intentionally.

Be the one who writes the handwritten note after a difficult week.

Be the one who notices the custodian before anyone else arrives.

Be the one who calls home with good news instead of only bad news.

Be the one who steps into a classroom simply to celebrate great teaching.

Be the one who thanks a paraprofessional whose work often goes unnoticed.

Be the one who remembers a student's name, asks about their soccer game, or notices when they're quieter than usual.

These moments rarely make it onto our evaluation forms or school improvement plans. Yet they are often the moments people remember most.



As elementary principals, we have a unique privilege. We get to influence children during some of the most formative years of their lives. We also have the opportunity to shape the careers of teachers who will impact hundreds of students long after they leave our buildings.

That responsibility deserves intentionality. Our students are watching us. They're learning how adults solve problems, celebrate others, respond to challenges, and build relationships. Long before they remember the announcements we made or the assemblies we planned, they'll remember how our school made them feel.

Our staff is watching too. They're deciding whether this is a place where they are valued, trusted, encouraged, and supported. Every day, whether we realize it or not, we're building something. We're building confidence. We're building trust. We're building resilience. We're building hope. Or we're not.

The beauty of leadership is that every morning gives us another opportunity to build differently than we did the day before. The beginning of the school year always feels full of possibility. The excitement of August has settled into the routines of October, and the culture we've been intentionally creating is beginning to take shape.

This is the perfect time to pause and ask ourselves if we're building the school we envisioned.

Not just academically.
Not just organizationally.
But relationally.

When people walk through our front doors, do they experience the culture we've intentionally set out to create? Do our teachers know they're appreciated? Do our students know they're seen? Do our families know they're welcome?

At the end of our careers, people probably won't remember every initiative we launched or every committee we chaired. They will remember how we led. They will remember whether we built trust before expectations. Whether we chose grace over judgment. Whether we made people feel like they mattered.

As principals, we don't have the opportunity to change every life every day. But every day, we have the opportunity to be the one for someone. And when enough leaders choose to do that—day after day, conversation after conversation, relationship after relationship—we don't just build successful schools. We build schools with intention. And those are the schools that change lives.



About the Author
Mrs. Shalyn Howe is the Elementary Principal at Joe D. Esther Elementary in the Lebanon R3 School District.

Connect with Shalyn:
Email: showe@lebanon.k12.mo.us
X/Twitter: @HoweShalyn

ASPIRING LEADERS WORKSHOP

SOMEONE SAW LEADERSHIP IN YOU

WHO DO YOU SEE IT IN?

You know the person—the teacher others turn to, the colleague who steps forward when something needs to be done, or the educator who builds trust, solves problems, brings people together, and keeps students at the center. They may already be leading. They just don't have the title yet.

MAESP's Aspiring Leaders Workshop gives promising educators an authentic look at the principalship. Led by practicing Missouri principals, participants explore the real work of school leadership through conversation, reflection, and real-world scenarios. The day focuses on leading people and culture, teaching and learning, difficult decisions, today's school community, leading change, personal leadership strengths, pathways to the principalship, and interviewing and next steps.

INVEST IN THE NEXT SCHOOL LEADER.

Think about someone on your staff who has leadership potential. Invite them to attend, encourage them to explore what might be next, and most important, tell them why you see leadership in them. Sometimes a simple nudge from the right person can change the direction of a career.

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Dr. Ta'Keshia Parker, Missouri's 2026 National Distinguished Principal and principal of Sappington Elementary School in the Lindbergh School District, stands at the Missouri State Capitol—a powerful symbol of the voice, leadership, and influence principals bring to education advocacy.

The Power of Principal Advocates

By John Schilling

A veteran school leader offers his advice to those looking to strengthen their advocacy efforts.

John Schilling is the Superintendent/Principal of the Southside Elementary School District in Hollister, California. He was a member of the inaugural cohort of the NAESP School Leaders Advocacy Network (SLAN) and is stepping down after more than four years as California's Federal Relations Coordinator. Amidst this transition, we asked John to reflect on his advocacy journey and any words of advice to his fellow school leaders to encourage them to be as active as he has been.

Getting Your Advocacy Start

My advocacy journey began when I was informed that I had to attend the NSLAC in DC. I had always been active in my state affiliate but never thought about becoming nationally active. I quickly realized that many of the decisions affecting our schools were being made by individuals who had never experienced the realities of leading a school. As a principal, I saw firsthand how legislation and policy directly impacted students, staff, and families. I recognized that if practicing school leaders were not at the table, contributing our voices, and more importantly, the voices of our students, they could be overlooked. That realization inspired me to become more involved. Advocacy became more than speaking with legislators; it became a responsibility to learn more about advocacy and share the knowledge with school leaders across the country.

Your Favorite Advocacy Experience

My favorite advocacy experiences have always been the opportunities to meet directly with legislators alongside fellow principals from across the country. Those conversations remind me that while our schools may look different, our commitment to students is fundamentally similar. The most meaningful moments occur when legislators genuinely listen, ask thoughtful questions, and begin to understand the challenges and opportunities facing our schools. Building those relationships reinforces the idea that advocacy is about partnership, trust, and finding common ground for the benefit of children.

A Tried and True Advocacy Strategy

My favorite advocacy activity is sharing real-life stories from schools that make a personal connection to the legislator's family or the area they represent. Data and research are important, but the stories of students, teachers, and families that connect to them make the story and the struggle real. Helping policymakers understand how a decision affects a child in a classroom, or their child in a classroom, transforms policy discussions into conversations about people. Those stories create connections that statistics cannot reflect.

How NAESP Supports Your Advocacy

NAESP has given me both the knowledge and the confidence to become a stronger advocate. It has helped me better understand the legislative process, provided opportunities to collaborate with outstanding school leaders from across the nation, and demonstrated how a unified voice can influence policy. Just as important is understanding that advocacy is an ongoing responsibility, not a once-a-year event.

Your Priorities Right Now

One of my highest priorities is ensuring that every child has access to an excellent educational experience, regardless of where they live or their circumstances. That includes equitable school funding, strengthening the educator pipeline, student loan reform, supporting student mental health, and ensuring schools have the resources needed to meet increasingly diverse student needs. I also believe it is critical that policymakers recognize the complexity of today's schools and provide the flexibility and support that educators need to help every student succeed. Lastly, I strongly support the reinstitution of DEI and the repeal of President Trump's executive order on DEI.

Your Proudest Advocacy Achievement

The accomplishment I am most proud of is encouraging other school leaders to find their own voice as advocates. While individual meetings with legislators are meaningful, helping fellow principals realize that their experiences matter and that they can influence educational policy creates meaningful impact. Advocacy becomes stronger when more educators are willing to share their expertise and build relationships with decision-makers.

Your Message to Fellow School Leaders



MAESP and MoASSP members gather on the Missouri Capitol steps during School Leader Advocacy Day on April 14, 2026, bringing a united voice to legislators on behalf of Missouri's schools, educators, and students.

My advice is simple: start by thinking about sharing your story. You don't have to be a policy expert to be an effective advocate. You are already an expert on your school, your students, and your community. Legislators want to hear from the people closest to the work. Build relationships, stay informed, and remember that advocacy is about service, not politics. Every conversation is an opportunity to improve educational opportunities for children. Most importantly, never underestimate the influence of your voice. As school leaders, we have both the privilege and the responsibility to advocate for those who depend on us every day.

About the Author
John Schilling is the Superintendent/Principal of the Southside Elementary School District in Hollister, California.

Via naesp.org.

2nd Annual

LEGISLATOR

PRINCIPAL FOR THE DAY



LEGISLATOR–PRINCIPAL FOR A DAY

Tuesday, December 8

or any day that works for you during that week.

Invite your legislator to walk your school with you.

Relationships shape our schools, our teams, and our communities. This December, take that same belief beyond your school walls. Invite your state representative or senator to spend 60–90 minutes with you in your school.

No dog-and-pony show.
No problem tour.
Just a real school day.

Let them see the teaching, leading, juggling, solving, and inspiring that happens every day. The goal is simple: build understanding and a relationship that lasts beyond the visit—so when a question comes up about how legislation may affect schools, they know a school leader they can call.

MAKE THE INVITATION. OPEN THE DOOR. BUILD THE RELATIONSHIP.

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MAKING THE MAIN THING MATTER

By Nick Pettit



"What actually got better for kids today?"

Early on, my assistant principal, Jocelyn, and I often ended our days the same way, exhausted, but reflective. We had been everywhere: walking the building, supporting students, answering staff questions, and responding to whatever came our way. We were busy, visible, and responsive. But we kept asking ourselves one question: What actually got better for kids today?

That question forced us to confront a hard truth. While the work felt important, it was often cyclical. We were maintaining the system more than improving it. We realized that being busy is not the same as getting better.

That shift in thinking changed how we led. In education, it's easy to get pulled in countless directions, but when everything gets your attention, nothing truly improves. Jocelyn and I had to get clear and disciplined in making the main thing the main thing and intentionally letting go of what didn't move student learning forward.

That clarity is what allowed us to move from simply managing the work to actually improving outcomes for kids.

Making Tier 1 Instruction the "Main Thing" in YOUR School

Every school leader has one thing in common: we want to ensure that all students receive high-quality Tier 1 instruction. At Maplewood Elementary, a Title I school in Kansas City, Missouri, we had the same goal. By making Tier 1 instruction the main thing and subtracting all the other noise, our leadership team saw our student achievement rise from 35% to 97% in 6 years.

Our "main thing" became the filter for every decision our leadership team made. We aligned our time, resources, systems, and structures, from instruction to family engagement, to support it. Our guiding coalition helped sustain this focus across the building. These small, intentional shifts led to big impact.

The Process of Subtraction: Auditing What Matters Most

While communicating to staff that Tier 1 instruction is our "main thing" is critical, that alone will not create sustained change. The real challenge lies in subtraction and ensuring that the building leaders' actions and words align with the main thing. Every decision a building leader makes communicates something to staff.

The process of subtraction does not mean that we, as leaders, ignore the many other demands our role has; it simply means we are intentional about building capacity within our teachers and staff so that we, as building leaders, can focus our attention on Tier 1 instruction.

It requires leaders to ask themselves:

- What can I delegate?
- What can we streamline so that we can do it through the lens of our main thing?
- What is not essential right now?
- What is this decision communicating to my staff?
- Does this action support or distract from our main thing?

When leaders take on too many initiatives, frequently shift priorities, or spend little time in classrooms, they unintentionally send the message that the "main thing" isn't truly the priority. At Maplewood, we regularly examined how we spent our time, how we used our resources and if our systems supported the main thing. We challenge you to do the same.

Principal Time Audit

How are you spending your time each day? Does it communicate to your staff that Tier 1 instruction is the main thing?

Try this: Block off time in your calendar for classroom visits/walkthroughs, instructional feedback, and teacher support. This often requires getting skilled at delegation, understanding what only you can do, and what others can do just as well or better.

Student Time Audit

How is the student day structured? Are students consistently engaged in high-quality instruction, or are there gaps in the schedule where learning time is lost or filled without purpose?

Try this: When building your master schedule, clearly define instructional minute expectations for teachers. Be intentional about minimizing transitions and reducing time students spend out of the classroom, so small pockets of the day aren't lost and learning time is maximized.

Try this: When you are scheduling school events and field trips, intentionally ensure they are not impacting direct instructional time. (Think field trips, assemblies, safety drills, parties/celebrations, community circle, etc.)

Budget Alignment

Does your budget reflect your priorities? Funding should directly support Tier 1 instruction through high-quality instructional materials for students and teachers.

Try this: Map out the required expenses you know won't directly connect to your main focus at the beginning of the year, then intentionally allocate the

remaining budget toward instructional resources and opportunities that grow teacher practice.

Try this: Make your teacher appreciation and any celebration throughout the year connected to teaching and learning. Teachers would love a cute basket, a box of Mr. Sketch markers and a text to level up their practice for teacher appreciation week!

Professional Learning for Staff

If someone were sitting in the "passenger seat" of your professional learning, would they feel a clear sense of direction? Is every minute of your PD aligned to your main thing? Do you turn every opportunity into a learning opportunity for staff?

Try this: Map out your PD for the year. Put in your district's required PD and then fill in the remaining time with high-quality learning opportunities for teachers directly connected to Tier 1 instruction.

Try this: Think through the experience from a participant's perspective. You haven't been in all the conversations behind closed doors about preparing for PD. Give a clear overview of what the year of PD is so teachers know where you are going.

Try this: Start every PLC with a 10-minute "PLC teach" led by YOU, the building leader, the lead learner in your school. Building leaders will never have enough PD time with staff. Here is an additional 40 minutes a month (10 minutes a week) with every single team.

Try this: Keep your PLCs focused on student achievement and high levels of teaching and learning.

Building Leaders Can't Do It Alone

We learned that we couldn't do this work just the two of us. Sustained improvement happens when leaders build a team that understands, believes in, and can articulate the "main thing," even when school leaders are not in the room.



For us, this meant developing teacher leaders, empowering staff, and creating shared ownership of the work. When everyone speaks the same language, the main thing becomes part of the school culture, not dependent on any one person.

To make this happen, your administrative team must have a clear vision, teach the "why" behind it to all staff, align every action and message with it, and stay consistent. Making the main thing the main thing requires clarity. Subtracting the rest from the leaders' plates requires discipline. As leaders, our goal is to do less, better, because that is what's best for kids.



About the Author
Mr. Nick Pettit is the Director of Federal Programs and Elementary Education at North Kansas City School District.

Connect with Nick:
Email: nicholas.pettit@nkcschools.org
X/Twitter: @nickpettitnkc

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Ashly Obermier
District Manager
Office: 573.449.3090
aobermier@inter-state.com



Caitlin Waldo
Office: 816.600.2454
cwaldo@inter-state.com



Allen & Christina Phillips
Office: 660.335.4218
cphillips@inter-state.com



Dana Scott
Office: 417.869.4800
dscott@inter-state.com



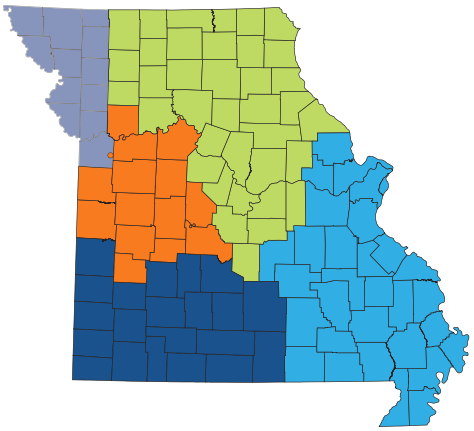
Julie Watt
Office: 816.600.2454
jwatt@inter-state.com



Valerie Peavler
Office: 573.449.3090
vpeavler@inter-state.com



Sarah Lamb
Office: 314.878.1800
slamb@inter-state.com





Kathy Maschmeier
Office: 314.878.1800
kmaschmeier@inter-state.com

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