

NAESP NATIONAL DISTINGUISHED PRINCIPAL[®] PROGRAM

A Program to Honor Principals in
Elementary and Middle-Level School Leadership

2026 APPLICATION

Due: February 13, 2026
to NAESP Executive Director





VIRGINIA ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

VAESP Members,

We're thrilled to announce the upcoming selection of Virginia's 2025 NAESP National Distinguished Principal! This prestigious program celebrates excellence in school leadership, honoring principals who have set high standards in student achievement, school culture, and community engagement.

If you know an outstanding principal who exemplifies these qualities, we encourage you to submit a nomination! The initial round of nominations will go to the VAESP Board, which will select the candidates who will move forward in the process. Let's recognize and uplift our exceptional leaders by nominating deserving colleagues for this esteemed award.

For details on eligibility and the nomination process, please refer to the application packet or reach out to us directly. We look forward to receiving your nominations and celebrating the incredible achievements within our VAESP community!

~ Program Background ~

The **National Distinguished Principals® (NDP)** program was established in 1984 to recognize elementary and middle level principals who set high standards for instruction, student achievement, character, and climate for the students, families, and staffs in their learning communities. The program was based on three fundamental ideas:

- Children’s attitudes towards learning and their perceptions of themselves as lifelong learners are established in the beginning school years.
- The scope and quality of children’s educational experiences are determined primarily by the school principal, who establishes, through the important work of teachers and the support of caring parents, the character of a particular school’s program.
- The dedication and enthusiasm of the outstanding principals who guide children’s early education experiences should be acknowledged to both show appreciation for their work as well as to allow them to serve as models for others in the field.

~ Process ~

Each year, NDPs represent pre-K–8 public schools from across the country, as well as principals of schools from the United States Departments of Defense Office of Educational Activity and the United States Department of State Office of Overseas Schools. Public school elementary and middle-level principals are nominated by peers in their state, and final selections are made by committees appointed by each of NAESP’s state affiliate offices. Honorees from private schools and overseas schools are selected by special committees.

The **National Distinguished Principals® (NDP)** awards ceremonies are held each fall in Washington, D.C. Specific dates, hotel site, and details regarding scheduled activities will be mailed to award recipients in June.

NAESP underwrites the costs for two nights of hotel accommodations for each honoree. Honorees are responsible for transportation costs and all other related expenses, including any additional nights of lodging in connection with their trip to Washington.

The 2026 program will begin November 2025, and all state-selected honorees must be submitted to NAESP **by May 8, 2026**. We invite all state affiliates to submit up to two honorees - one elementary and one middle-level - for recognition on the national level. **All selected awardees must submit a professional, digital photograph (a “headshot” with a plain, color background) at 300 dpi or higher.** A roster of 2026 award winners will be featured on the NAESP website.

~ Criteria ~

Criteria established by NAESP require that the individual is a practicing principal with at least five years' experience in the principalship, who plans to continue as a practicing principal. The principal must demonstrate evidence of outstanding contributions to the community and education profession and:

- Be a member of NAESP for at least one year at the time of nomination to NAESP and maintain membership through the conclusion of the NAESP NDP Award Ceremony;
- Be a practicing principal at the time of nomination;
- Has been a building principal (not assistant principal) for five years;
- Is clearly committed to excellence;
- Leads a school that has programs designed to meet the academic and social needs of all students; and
- Has firm ties to parents and the community.

PLEASE NOTE

Elementary school NDP candidates must be principals of schools with students in either grades pre-K, K, 1, 2, 3, or 4, though older students may attend as well.

Middle level school NDP candidates must be principals of schools with students in grades 4, 5, 6, 7, and/or 8 only.

~ Inquiries and Additional Information ~

For further information about the National Distinguished Principals Program, contact:

Nikki Sparks

Assistant Executive Director, Executive Services and Recognition Programs

nsparks@naesp.org | ndp@naesp.org | 703-518-6268

www.naesp.org



NAESP NATIONAL DISTINGUISHED PRINCIPAL™ PROGRAM

A Program to Recognize Excellence in School Leadership

2026 NOMINATION APPLICATION

Nominee's Name _____

Nominee's School _____ Grade Configuration _____

Address _____

Phone _____ E-mail _____

School Type: ☐ Urban ☐ Suburban ☐ Rural ☐ Small Town School Enrollment _____

Total Number of Years as a Principal _____

Nominator's Name _____

Nominator's Phone _____

Nominator's Email _____

Relationship to Nominee _____

Please read requirements for official application carefully:

Award Criteria

The nominee:

- **Has been a member of NAESP for at least one year at the time of nomination and will maintain membership through the conclusion of the NAESP NDP Award Ceremony;**
- Is an active principal of a school in which a commitment to excellence is clearly evident;
- Has been an active principal for at least five years;
- Will remain in active service in a position of school leadership during the school year in which he/she will serve as NDP;
- Shows a strong commitment to the principalship through active membership in professional associations;
- Is respected by students, colleagues, parents, and the community at large;
- Assumes an active role in his/her community, distinguishing himself/herself as a leader in civic, religious, or humanitarian activities;
- Shows strong educational leadership by setting high expectations for school staff and students; and
- Maintains an orderly, purposeful learning environment.

If you are interested in applying or in nominating a candidate for the National Distinguished Principal™ award, please complete this form along with an attached letter (not to exceed two pages) identifying the strengths and skills that you feel make the candidate eligible for this award. **Please check with your state principal's affiliate or sponsoring organization to determine deadlines for submission or any additional state requirements.**

Successful candidates will be required to complete the formal application form upon notification from their state or sponsoring organization's selection committee.

Nominator's Signature

Date

Supervisor or Employer's Signature

Date

Return completed Nomination Application to *your state principals' organization or your sponsoring organization*. Your state affiliate principals organization's address can be found at naesp.org.

Revised 11/2025

NAESP NATIONAL DISTINGUISHED PRINCIPAL[®] PROGRAM

NOMINEE'S APPLICATION FORM

(TO BE COMPLETED BY NOMINEE - Please type, word process, or print clearly)

| | | | | | |
|-------------|--------|-------|----------------|------|--------|
| Name | Prefix | First | Middle Initial | Last | Suffix |
|-------------|--------|-------|----------------|------|--------|

~ CONTACT INFORMATION - HOME ~

| | | | | | |
|---------------------|--------|------|-------|-----|---------|
| Home Address | Street | City | State | Zip | Country |
|---------------------|--------|------|-------|-----|---------|

| | | |
|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|
| Cell Phone | Home E-Mail | Personal Twitter Handle |
|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------------------|

~ SCHOOL INFORMATION ~

School Name

| | | | | | |
|-----------------------|--------|------|-------|-----|---------|
| School Address | Street | City | State | Zip | Country |
|-----------------------|--------|------|-------|-----|---------|

| | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| School Phone (Include Area Code) | School Fax (Include Area Code) | School Twitter Handle |
|---|---------------------------------------|------------------------------|

Applicant's School E-Mail

Is your school (select one):

- ☐ Elementary (Must include either pre-K, K, 1, 2, 3, or 4, though older students may attend as well)
- ☐ Middle (May NOT include pre-K, K, 1, 2, 3)
- ☐ K-8 (May also include pre-K)
- ☐ K-12 (May also include pre-K)
- ☐ Other Explain: _____

School Grade Configuration _____ **School Enrollment** _____

Percentage of Students Receiving Free/Reduced-Price Meals _____

School Setting (circle one): **Urban** **Suburban** **Small Town** **Rural**

~DISTRICT AND SUPERINTENDENT'S INFORMATION~

| | | | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------|--------------|---|---------------|
| School District | | | District Phone (Include Area Code) | |
| Superintendent's Name | Prefix | First | Last | Suffix |
| Superintendent's E-Mail | | | | |

PLEASE DOWNLOAD THE SUPERVISOR'S CERTIFICATION FORM (PAGE 12 OF THE APPLICATION), TO BE COMPLETED BY YOUR SUPERVISOR AND UPLOAD IT BELOW WHEN COMPLETED.

~ PROFESSIONAL INFORMATION ~

Professional Experience (List by most recent, excluding current position/school)

| Position | Name and Location of School | Dates |
|----------|-----------------------------|-------|
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |

Total Number of Years as a Principal _____ **Total Number of Years in Current Position/School** _____

Professional Preparation (List by most recent)

| Degree | Name and Location of Institution | Dates |
|--------|----------------------------------|-------|
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |

~ **SCHOOL INFORMATION** ~

School's Grade Configuration (check one)

☐ Elementary School Nominee- School's Grade Configuration_____

(must include either pre-K, K, 1, 2, 3, or 4, though older students may attend as well)

☐ Middle School Nominee – School's Grade Configuration_____

(may NOT include pre-K, K, 1, 2)

School Enrollment_____

Students Receiving Free/Reduced-Price Meals_____ %

~ PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES, AWARDS, AND HONORS ~

| Name of Professional Association/Organization | Offices Held / Awards Received | Dates |
|--|---------------------------------------|--------------|
| <hr/> | <hr/> | <hr/> |
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~ SERVICE TO COMMUNITY ~

| Name of Community Association/Organization | Offices Held / Awards Received | Dates |
|---|---------------------------------------|--------------|
| <hr/> | <hr/> | <hr/> |
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~ **THREE MOST SIGNIFICANT ACCOMPLISHMENTS AS A PRINCIPAL** ~

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

~ BEST PRACTICES FOR BETTER SCHOOLS ~

An important component of each NDP program is the compilation of Best Practices used in the schools of our National Distinguished Principals. Please submit your Best Practices in the manner explained below.

- Describe **two to five** practices that have worked well in your school. When appropriate, supply accompanying data (graphs, spreadsheets, tables, etc.) that address results and outcomes.
- Categorize each of your ideas by using the following abbreviations (many will fall into more than one category):

| Abbr. | Category |
|-------|---|
| AP | Assessment Tools for Principals (Including Self-Assessment) |
| EC | Early Childhood Education |
| IL | Principal's Role as Instructional Leader |
| PC | Parent and Community Relations |
| SA | Student Assessments |
| SI | School Improvement Strategies |
| SL | Student Leadership |
| ST | Standardized Tests |
| TA | Teacher Assessment and Evaluation |
| | Teacher and Staff Development |
| TL | Turnaround Leadership |
| WC | Whole Child Initiatives |
| 21st | 21st Century Learning (problem solving, teaching creativity and collaboration across borders) |

FORMAT GUIDELINES (see attached sample copy):

1. Separate each practice by title.
2. There is no word limit, but NAESP reserves the right to edit copy if necessary.

“Best Practices Sample”

Full Name, Title

School Name

City, State

Around the Corner, Around the World (21st, WC)

A goal of Name school district is to graduate world-class citizens who will become quality contributors in their communities and beyond. In past years, educators at School Name have reached out to schools as far away as Afghanistan and Japan, connecting children and exposing them to diverse customs and languages. School Name’s students have learned that, despite cultural differences, kids are essentially just kids. Principal Name believes that same lesson can be taught by partnering with a school just around the corner.

He and his team approached the staff at the Name of Academy—where 95 percent of students are Latino and many students speak Spanish as their first language—to propose a partnership. Initially, the goal was for 4th graders at both schools to expand their understanding of what it means to be a community while learning math and science concepts together in a fun team-building activity called the Solar Sprint. But the program blossomed into more when teachers and principals began to share resources and time—and meals out—and students at both schools joined forces to feed hungry children around the world.

Implementation

Twelve LEGO E-Lab kits were purchased with Dream funds for the 4th grade classes at School Name so that they could participate in a Solar Sprint competition at School Name in June. Working in teams, students designed, built, tested and raced solar cars; in the process they learned about simple machines, renewable energy, speed and efficiency ratios, and other concepts. On the day of the race, engineering students from the Name of University came to display their race car designs and interact with students.

While students worked on their solar cars, they also engaged in community service projects. School Name students and their families collected and donated books—and much-needed sports equipment—to the Name of Academy. Children from both schools packaged 15,000 meal kits to support Kids Against Hunger, a humanitarian food-aid organization. Board of education members and the school superintendent were in attendance at the event to show their support.

Results

Fourth-graders from both schools applied math and science concepts and raced their cars in a friendly competition for a successful Solar Sprint. But the alliance that started with a math-science project went beyond what organizers had anticipated. School Name students organized a book drive for and took part in a collaborative service project with their new friends at the school.

And principals and teachers from the two schools became friends, sharing resources and ideas and helping out at one another’s school events. The partnership was acknowledged by a National PTA’s Family-School Partnership Award of Merit.

Next Steps

Pearson and his team plan to continue their relationship with school. They have applied for a grant to purchase computer equipment that will allow staff at the two schools to communicate more easily using video conferencing.

~ SCHOOL LEADERSHIP STATEMENTS ~

Please answer the following four questions regarding your professional beliefs, practices, and accomplishments in each of these areas that qualify you to represent your state or organization as its National Distinguished Principal.

Please limit each response to a maximum of 300 words, answer each question on a separate sheet of paper, and include your name in the upper right-hand corner of each page.

Question 1: How do you balance leadership and management duties to best support student achievement?

Question 2: How have you involved parents and community members in supporting student achievement?

Question 3: How do you support learners who are struggling, challenge learners who are excelling, and maintain high standards for all?

Question 4: How do you cultivate, monitor, and advance a positive climate in your building?

NAESP's *Leading Learning Communities: Pillars, Practices, and Priorities for Effective Principals* (2020) identifies nine key areas of effective school leadership. Please refer to these areas as you answer the four questions above.

- I. Establishing shared values and vision for schools.
- II. Engaging and communicating with families and the community.
- III. Emphasizing personal and professional well-being and development.
- IV. Leading personalized and collaborative teaching and learning.
- V. Distributing leadership among a community.
- VI. Supporting the academic, social and emotional, and physical needs of children and adults.
- VII. Managing talent and resources to maximize effective teaching and learning.
- VIII. Cultivating support in the district and community.
- IX. Focusing on what matters most.



SUPERVISOR'S CERTIFICATION FORM

The above-named principal has been nominated to be a **National Distinguished Principal**. This form is to certify that the principal's employer understands the following obligations and responsibilities inherent in acceptance of this award.

- The Distinguished Principal will be expected to travel to and from Washington, D.C. to participate in the two-day recognition events and ceremony.
- The National Association of Elementary School Principals will provide two nights lodging, an opening night welcome reception, and one dinner (the awards banquet) for each honoree and one guest. **Costs for travel and other meals are assumed by the nominee, the school district, or other state or local sources.**
- The Distinguished Principal may receive limited requests to represent the National Association of Elementary School Principals on national committees. In these cases, costs are borne by either NAESP or the sponsoring party.
- Publicity for the Distinguished Principal may generate occasional opportunities for speaking engagements at the state level as well as requests to visit the principal's school.

This is to certify that I acknowledge and endorse the nomination of _____
 Name of Nominee

as the National Distinguished Principal representing _____
 State, Private School, or Other Jurisdiction

 Name of Supervisor/Employer (please print)

 Title

 Address of Supervisor/Employer

 Phone Number (including area code)

 Signature of Supervisor/Employer

 Date

The National Distinguished Principal program does not discriminate.

NOTE TO THE NOMINEE: Please submit this Supervisor's Certification Form with your completed application packet to your state professional association, state affiliate NDP liaison, or private school authority.



NATIONAL DISTINGUISHED PRINCIPAL DOCUMENT CHECKLIST

The National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP)
requires this completed packet of information on file for each
National Distinguished Principal.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| _____ Application Packet | _____ Four letters of reference: |
| _____ Best Practices | _____ Supervisor _____ Fellow administrator |
| _____ Signed Affirmation Statement | _____ Teacher _____ Parent/civic/community member |
| _____ Supervisor's Certification Form | |

_____ **A high-quality, color photo.**

Photos should be a headshot (chest/shoulders up) with a plain, colored background.

IMPORTANT!

NAESP needs a high-resolution, color photo of each NDP. Images need to be at least 300 dpi, 1500 x 2000 pixels (5 x 7 inches) and in .jpg, .png, or.pdf format.



NOMINEE REFERENCE FORM

NATIONAL DISTINGUISHED PRINCIPAL

Letters of Reference

Name of Nominee: _____

Each National Distinguished Principal nominee is asked to secure four letters of reference, one from each of the following persons: **an immediate supervisor or superintendent, a fellow administrator, a teacher currently serving on the nominee's staff, and a parent/civic/community leader.** Each letter of reference should include a copy of this form.

To the Nominee's Reference:

The National Distinguished Principal (NDP) selection committee appreciates your help in assessing this NDP candidate's skills and knowledge in the area of school leadership. Please base your comments on the nominee's professional performance. Limit your comments to one 8 ½ x 11" page, using at least 10 pt. type. If you prefer, your letter of reference may be mailed directly to the nominee's state affiliate or the organization that he/she represents.

This letter of reference is from (please check one):

☐ **The nominee's supervisor**

☐ **A fellow administrator**

☐ **A teacher**

☐ **A parent/civic/community member**

Please print or type.

Printed Name of Reference

Title

Address

City

State

Zip

Country if not USA

Phone (including area code)

Fax (including area code)

E-Mail Address

Signature of Reference

Date

NAESP NATIONAL DISTINGUISHED PRINCIPAL® PROGRAM



NOMINEE'S AFFIRMATION STATEMENT

I do hereby affirm that I plan on remaining in a position of school leadership during the year in which I am serving as a National Distinguished Principal.

I do further affirm that I have been a member of NAESP for at least one year at the time of my nomination and will continue to be a member through October 2025.

I do further affirm that the information included in this application packet is a fair and true representation of the facts of my professional career.

I do hereby grant my permission for any or all of the enclosed materials (including my photo but excluding my home address, home and/or cell phone number, and home e-mail address) to be shared with persons and organizations interested in promoting the National Distinguished Principals program and its honorees.

I do hereby agree to serve as an "ambassador" for the principal profession and the National Association of Elementary School Principals on the local, state, and national level.

PRINTED NAME OF NOMINEE: _____

NOMINEE'S SIGNATURE: _____

DATE: _____