

# Celebrate *the* Principals

## Making Time for Advocacy

By Sarah McKibben

*Principal Leslie R. Murray served on the NASSP Task Force on the Reauthorization of IDEA and sees it as every school leader's responsibility to get involved at the state and federal levels.*

**Principal Leadership:** Most principals have too much to do already—what prompted you to add a national advocacy effort to your schedule?

**Leslie R. Murray:** I was a special education resource room teacher for 13 years and have participated in hundreds of special education team meetings and meetings with parents during my 33 years in education. Joining the NASSP task force gave me the chance to share my personal and professional experiences. I thoroughly believe that committed people working together can make a difference, and I wanted to be a part of that.

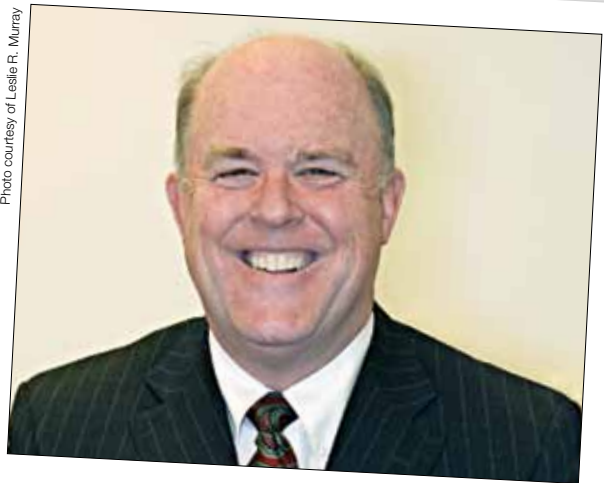
**PL:** What is your advice to your colleagues about their role in policy making?

**Murray:** I would advise all principals to get involved at the state and national levels. I was very pleasantly surprised at how interested members of Congress were in our work when we visited Capitol Hill. In several cases, they truly did not understand the difficulties with the present law and welcomed our suggestions. Most of all, they wanted to hear our personal stories of what was happening in our schools. Every principal should extend a written invitation to visit their school to their Congress members at the federal and state levels. If they will not visit, then I feel it is imperative that principals write letters to them and tell their stories.

**PL:** What was the appeal for you of the NASSP task force?

**Murray:** First, it was an opportunity to gain a national perspective from fellow principals, college professors, national advocacy groups, state advocacy groups, legislators, and professionals from the U.S. Department of Education. Second, it was a chance to state the problems and offer solutions from a practitioner's point of view. Specifically, it allowed

Photo courtesy of Leslie R. Murray



me to articulate my school's difficulty in finding qualified special education teachers.

**PL:** Do you think that your efforts will make a difference?

**Murray:** I am hopeful that Congress will consider the recommendations that we have made when they reauthorize IDEA. Although it is certainly acceptable to hold principals accountable for student achievement—including that of students who are diagnosed with learning problems, low-income students, and immigrant students who do not speak English—principals must have teachers to put into their classrooms.

Currently, I cannot find special education, mathematics, and science teachers. There are few, if any, applicants for these positions. The state and federal governments must find ways to [encourage] students to become teachers and to adjust overbearing certification requirements. This can be done through tax incentives, dual certifications, loan forgiveness, extra monetary supplements, and further professional development.

Is it fair to hold principals accountable for the lack of achievement of special needs students when there are no special needs teachers? Is it fair to continue to have school budgets stretched to meet the unfunded mandates of special education throughout the nation? These are just two commonsense questions that informed the task force's legislative recommendations. **PL**

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