Diversity Drives the Enrollment Boom

A recent report by the Educating School Leaders brought much needed attention to the university-based school leadership. The student population of public and private schools has reached an all-time high. In addition, our schools are more diverse than at any other time in the nation’s history. In 1970, the baby boomer school-aged population peaked at 48.7 million students, a number that has now been surpassed by another generation—the children of baby boomers. According to the U.S. Census Bureau and the Department of Education, the number of students in the nation’s schools has reached 49.5 million—approximately 33 million elementary students and 17 million high school students—and is expected to inch up to 50 million within the next decade.

Along with growth, comes diversity. When baby boomers populated the schools, the student population was 79 percent white, 14 percent black, 6 percent Hispanic, and 1 percent Asian, Pacific Islander, and other. In 2003, 60 percent of students were white, 18 percent Hispanic, 16 percent black, and 4 percent Asian, Pacific Islander, and other.

Immigration is a significant factor in school diversity. Twenty-two percent of students today have at least one foreign-born parent and 6 percent are foreign born themselves. As the population increases and continues to grow more heterogeneous, schools must be equipped to prepare our children for this exciting new landscape.

The World is Flat

Globalization is driving today’s world economy. In his book *The World is Flat*, journalist Thomas Friedman discusses how globalization has made the physical divide between countries seem much smaller. Friedman argues that globalization will mean preparing the next generation of young people to be technologically savvy, creative, ambitious, and highly-educated so that they can be competitive in tomorrow’s workforce.

Today’s young people—echo boomers or millennials as they’ve been affectionately nicknamed—are experiencing a very different world than their parents. Technology jobs have replaced manufacturing jobs. And the Internet has created a virtual connection that allows for quicker and more efficient communication. For example, students in one part of the world can “chat” with students in another part, within seconds and without ever leaving their classroom.

Antidote for Change

NAESP and NASSP, representing more than 62,000 principals and assistant principals, welcome the growth and diversity in our schools. We recognize the need for our principals to adjust to the changing school environment and are committed to providing them with the support they need to succeed in their jobs, including professional development, a collective voice for advocacy, and relevant education news and research. However, we also recognize that increased funding and flexibility is needed to help schools meet the challenge of closing the achievement gap and helping all children succeed in life. That’s why it’s inexcusable that at a time when schools are bursting at the seams, federal education funding is being slashed instead of being augmented.

Schools in fact need more resources to prepare students for college and their professional careers. To ensure that students are fully prepared to meet the demands and excel in the 21st century…

• The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act must be fully funded and more flexible. NCLB’s current funding cannot meet the varying needs of this growing population. This year, schools are required to test students in reading and math in grades 3 through 8, while developing academic standards for science in elementary, middle, and high schools. In addition, schools are expected to test in reading and math at least once in grades 10 through 12. Literacy is the driver of academic improvement in all subjects. Increasing academic rigor in any subject area for grades 4 through 12 requires improving reading comprehension and writing skills and integrating high-level language arts standards (oral and written language skills) into each content area.

Currently, the majority of schools don’t have the staff expertise or the fiscal resources to support literacy development and improvement programs in their schools. The President and Congress can not expect schools to implement NCLB requirements and be proficient by 2014 without the necessary funding and flexibility.

• Schools must receive increased resources to prepare for the influx of diverse students, many of whom will need English Language Learner (ELL) services. Schools will also need more realistic methods to assess the academic achievement of ELL students, including flexible testing accommodations.

• States must invest in high-quality early childhood education programs. Now is an opportune time to advocate for universal opportunity for children to attend early childhood education programs. Early intervention for three- and four-year olds has a long-term impact that can go a long way in helping to eliminate the achievement gap before it ever widens.

• Schools, and class sizes, need to remain small and schools must be staffed properly. Just because the population is at an all-time high, does not mean schools should be overflowing. Smaller schools, and class sizes, are much more manageable.

• School facilities must be modernized, including making sure that all classrooms are “wired” to keep pace with new technology. Many school facilities are in need of an extreme makeover. Upgrading these aging buildings to accommodate the growing population is imperative. In addition, principals and teachers need to receive the professional development necessary to stay abreast of the latest technology.

A New Frontier

There are so many demands made on principals today, many more than there were 35 years ago. Yet regardless of the generation they are serving, principals are selfless leaders who only want what’s best for children. To continue their commitment to excellence, principals deserve all the support we can give them to help schools thrive.

When baby boomers attended K–12 schools in the 1970s, pioneering scientists and engineers were busy crafting new technology—like computers and the World Wide Web—for the next generation. In 1971 the floppy disk was introduced, a technology that grew to revolutionize how we save and share data. Although we still rely on the floppy disk, technology has evolved so much that within the next few years, this data saving device will more than likely be obsolete. That’s how quickly the world is changing. There’s no reason for our schools to be left behind and not change with it. The focus should be on educating new pioneers to lead us into the 21st century. Our children are the pioneers and they deserve as much.