



NASSP Selects Three Finalists for 2021 National Principal of the Year

School Leaders from Alabama, Pennsylvania, and Florida honored for fostering and sustaining an environment responsive to each school's and community's specific needs

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Reston, VA—The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) today named Adam Clemons, Richard Gordon, and Michelle Kefford as the finalists for the 2021 NASSP National Principal of the Year (POY) award. These three school leaders have been selected for their exemplary work in ensuring the success and well-being of students and adults in their learning communities.

Adam Clemons, Piedmont High School, Piedmont, AL

When Adam Clemons became principal of the small, rural high school in 2013, he set out to help kids feel socially connected, be academically successful, and have an advantage as they enter college or the workforce. Clemons developed a teachers-as-advisers program—which was then used as a model for the state of Alabama—to provide a 30-minute advisory period to allow teachers and paraprofessionals to build relationships that support students academically, psychologically, and emotionally. Working with district leaders, Clemons helped implement mental health counseling services and training for teachers at local schools so students didn't have to travel out of town for counseling services, saving both time and expenses. In Clemons' time as principal, extracurricular participation has grown by 20 percent, the graduation rate has risen by 8 percent, and discipline referrals decreased by over 50 percent.

Richard Gordon, Paul Robeson High School for Human Services, Philadelphia, PA

Richard Gordon became principal of Paul Robeson High School (PRHS) in 2013 after the school narrowly escaped permanent closure. The root of the discord was the conflicting relationships between stakeholders—a negative attitude brought on by despondent staff members who questioned their belief in students' ability to succeed, and students who did not feel academically, psychologically, emotionally, or physically safe. Gordon designed a strategic response plan that embraced prevention and intervention measures. A Safe Corridors Program—a collaboration between PRHS and the University City District—provides extra supervision for students traveling to and from school, increasing safety in surrounding neighborhoods. Gordon added over 30 new community partnerships, including a mental health

therapy program that provides trauma support for students and builds a trauma-informed school environment. Since the implementation of these programs, truancy rates have decreased by over 22 percent, graduation rates now average 95 percent, and school suspension rates fell below 5 percent, making PRHS one of the safest schools in Philadelphia.

Michelle Kefford, Charles W. Flanagan High School, Pembroke Pines, FL

Michelle Kefford has always been cognizant of the importance of fostering a positive, supportive, and collaborative school culture. She believes it is critical to be consistently visible, available, and approachable, not only to staff but to students and the entire school community. She established “Kefford’s Kitchen,” a program where groups of students can sign up to have lunch with her and ask questions, provide feedback, make suggestions, and share their ideas and vision for the school. Kefford believes that if members of the school community feel valued, respected, appreciated, and loved, the teachers will give more, and the students will learn more. Kefford introduced a mentoring program that pairs low-performing ninth- and 10th-grade students with high-performing 11th- and 12th-grade students. In the first year of the program, learning gains for the school’s lowest quartile rose from 48 percent to 69 percent.

“Mr. Clemons, Mr. Gordon, and Ms. Kefford are three school leaders who have made it a priority to create school cultures that value wellness, relationships, and communication while using collaborative leadership and other effective learning strategies to drive student success,” stated NASSP Executive Director JoAnn Bartoletti. “We are thrilled to honor these three exceptional principals for their leadership and efforts to ensure the success, safety, and emotional well-being of their students as well as their entire learning communities.”

Each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Department of State Office of Overseas Schools, and the Department of Defense Education Activity select one middle level or high school principal to represent their state, from whom three finalists are chosen. The NASSP National Principal of the Year will be selected from among the finalists.

The 2021 National Principal of the Year will be announced in October during National Principals Month. To read more about each of the finalists, visit <https://www.nassp.org/poy-finalists>. For more information about National Principals Month, please visit www.principalsmonth.org.

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About the POY program

The NASSP Principal of the Year (POY) program honors State Principals of the Year from each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia, the U.S. Department of State Office of Overseas Schools, and the U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity. Out of these exceptional school leaders, three are selected as finalists and one is ultimately selected for the National Principal of the Year award. The award recognizes outstanding middle level and high school principals who have succeeded in providing high-quality learning opportunities for students as well as demonstrating exemplary contributions to the profession.

For more information on the POY program, please visit www.nassp.org/poy.

About NASSP

The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) is the leading organization of and voice for principals and other school leaders across the United States. NASSP seeks to transform education through school leadership, recognizing that the fulfillment of each student's potential relies on great leaders in every school committed to the success of each student. Reflecting its long-standing commitment to student leadership development, NASSP administers the [National Honor Society](#), [National Junior Honor Society](#), [National Elementary Honor Society](#), and [National Student Council](#).