

Leadership *for* Change

2009

AASA National
Superintendent
of the Year Forum



American Association of School Administrators



About AASA

The American Association of School Administrators, founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders in the United States and throughout the world. AASA's mission is to support and develop effective school system leaders who are dedicated to the highest quality public education for all children. For more information, visit www.aasa.org. Follow AASA on twitter at www.twitter.com/AASAHQ. Become a fan of the AASA Facebook page at www.facebook.com/AASAPage.



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Introduction

In October 2009, the American Association of School Administrators invited superintendents of the year from across the country to gather in Denver, Colo., for three days of intensive dialogue about the challenges facing today's district leaders. Representing rural, urban and suburban districts, state award winners came to listen, share best practices and talk candidly about lessons learned as they led major transformation in their public schools. While their approaches varied, the end result was the same: improved learning, teaching and achievement for students.

This publication captures the best thinking of those attending the AASA National Superintendent of the Year Forum and examines the elements of successful leadership for change. AASA wishes to thank the superintendents who participated in the forum. We are hopeful we have captured your observations with the same vigor and integrity with which you shared them.

We begin with the compelling story of Atlanta Public Schools and AASA National Superintendent of the Year Beverly Hall's 10-year journey of transformation.

One District's Decade-Long Journey

When Beverly Hall arrived in Atlanta to run the city's public school system, she was the fifth superintendent in 10 years. The challenges were immense. More than half of the district's students were not meeting state standards. Chronic absenteeism was common. The high school graduation rate was low, only 39 percent by 2002 (the earliest year allowing for comparison to the present-day calculation).

Within six months, Hall admits she was ready to leave. Instead, she and her team set into motion a series of changes that would have a profound impact on the district and its children. Together, they focused on four broad goals:

- Holding high expectations for all students
- Improving student achievement and closing the achievement gap
- Increasing the graduation rate
- Ensuring resources were distributed equitably

Hall says putting these goals on paper was easy; the hard part was facilitating a major shift in attitudes and beliefs to achieve them. A 1999 survey by the district of its kindergarten teachers showed that nine out of 10 admitted they did not believe their students would finish high school. What's more, principals and teachers were not prepared for teaching and learning in the 21st century.

Most of the district's 50,000 students are children of color, and many come from poverty. Three percent of the district's students are English Language Learners.

Under Hall's leadership, the district set out to reform all aspects of the organization: curriculum, instruction, governance, business operations and the organization of the central office. Curriculum and instruction were familiar territory for Hall and her team. Shaking up the status quo, however, presented significant political implications.

Governance was one of the most critical political challenges facing Hall. The relationship between the board and the superintendent was acrimonious during the new superintendent's first year. But

Most of the 50,000 students in Atlanta Public Schools are children of color, and many come from poverty. Three percent of the district's students are English Language Learners.

thanks to leaders in business, philanthropic and civic communities, outstanding candidates were recruited to serve on the school board, and strict ethics legislation was championed at the state level for board members.

Those same business and community leaders also partnered with schools and invested in the district's reform agenda, which was driven by data analysis, flexible instructional programs, building capacity of teachers and leaders, and built-in accountability.

- **Data analysis.** District leaders reviewed data to assess students' current academic standings and to determine what they needed to achieve the district's goals. Today, teachers and principals use an instructional management system called Insight to access standards and to model lesson plans and best practices. Teachers use student performance profiles during parent-teacher conferences. Teacher, class and school data inform discussions about instructional effectiveness. The superintendent reports quarterly to the school board about progress, and members of her cabinet receive annual increases in their compensation only if they meet specific performance objectives.
- **Flexible instructional programs.** Schools were asked to select and adopt a comprehensive school reform design from a list of research-based models endorsed by the district — unless schools were confident they could reach the targets set for them using their current strategies. The district's lowest-performing schools were required to put in place Project GRAD, a successful model used in other urban districts. Instruction was also aligned with the state's standards. Today, instructional coaches in literacy and math are in most elementary and middle schools.
- **Building capacity of teachers and leaders.** School-based professional learning focuses on the challenges of the urban classroom, curriculum, standards and literacy. Everyone now knows what high-quality student work looks like. A list of the 26 best teaching practices was developed after reviewing research on instruction. An infusion of dollars from The Wallace Foundation helps principals function as coaches and educational leaders, not just administrative managers.
- **Built-in accountability.** Annual benchmarks were set for reading and math at the district level. A system of annual school-level goals was set, which focused on four areas: reading and language arts, math, attendance and enrollment

"The central office is here to serve schools and not the other way around."

*2009 AASA National
Superintendent of
the Year Beverly Hall*

in higher level courses. Each school's targets were rigorous but realistic. Schools that meet 70 percent or more of their targets are recognized publicly and every employee — from the custodian to the principal — receives a financial incentive to keep up the good work.

In addition to these areas, the district implemented bold, specialized interventions to transform middle schools and high schools as well as a math and science initiative launched in 2007.

Work is now under way to reallocate resources to support instruction. The central office has been reconfigured into school reform teams. "The central office is here to serve schools and not the other way around," says Hall. "We have created a one-stop shop for all support services that decreases the bureaucracy for principals so they can spend more time on instructional leadership."

Hall's leadership to turn around the district's ailing schools is getting results:

- Every year since 2000, across the curriculum and in all grades, Atlanta Public Schools has posted steady academic gains, even as the state has raised the bar with more rigorous standards.
- Schools are closing the achievement gaps within the state. In 2009, 90 percent of the district's eighth-graders met or exceeded standards in English/language arts, for example.
- Today, one in three elementary school students exceeds the standards, and the rate of students exceeding standards in the higher grades is growing as well.
- On the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the percentage of Atlanta's students scoring at or above proficient and advanced has risen in all NAEP grades and subjects tested from 2002 to 2007.
- The district's graduation rate has risen from 39 percent in 2002 to 69 percent in 2009.

Hall is now the longest serving superintendent in an urban district in the country. She says Atlanta Public Schools has come a long way in both perception and performance: "With our efforts focused on total district transformation, we hope to continue to demonstrate that urban school students can learn. And they can do so at high levels — not just in a school here and there, but on a scale that has systematic impact."

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Superintendent of
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Innovative Efforts that Get Results

Transforming schools to get results for students takes time, commitment and support — both inside the organization and in the community. How do leaders open the door to a conversation about transformation with stakeholders? How do they create a culture that embraces change? For many, it requires thinking strategically, choosing priorities, focusing on proven best practices and deepening stakeholders' understanding about why schools must change.

Some superintendents begin by informing parents and their community about what it means to provide every student with a 21st century education in today's global economy. "A majority of my community in a small rural area hasn't grasped that yet," says Mississippi Superintendent of the Year Anthony Morris. "Because they have worked in the tourism field, parents think their kids should, too. But those jobs are drying up. I'm working hard to help change that mindset."

Longevity in Leadership

Consistent leadership over time is key, too. Most superintendents attending the Denver forum have been in this role longer than the average tenure of three years. That's important, says Oregon Superintendent of the Year Juli DiChiro. "It takes time for new ideas to get traction. It also takes persistence from us to stick with our proposed changes through the bumps. People hold on to old practices because they feel more comfortable doing so. We can keep pressure on the system to change."

Another form of leadership is found in instructional coaches who help schools — and, ultimately, entire districts — transform and succeed. "Academic coaches are worth their weight in gold if you hire the right ones," says Arkansas Superintendent of the Year Jerry Guess. Utah Superintendent of the Year McKell Withers says his district is using coaches to help teachers interpret student achievement data as well.

Using Technology in the Classroom

Some superintendents are using technology to engage students in the classroom with positive results. Wyoming Superintendent of the Year Kevin Mitchell's district launched a new writing program for students, which incorporates Twitter, wikis, blogs and video clips. Teachers select issues that are of interest to students. The added benefit: The students' responses inform educators and administrators about how students view issues critical to learning and their environment. Some of the questions students are asked: What do you think about school uniforms? What should we do about teen pregnancy? What do you think about teen drinking?

Students also have conversations about these topics with other students — all the while sharpening their thinking and writing skills. "I have never had my classes as engaged as my teachers do now," says Mitchell. "Students love it. It's better than going home and playing video games all night."

"We have to capitalize on their way of communicating," agrees DiChiro. "We still need to teach formal writing, of course, but Twitter and other technologies can be used as a bridge to formal writing."

Helping Struggling Families, Helping Students

For some superintendents, enhancing a child's experience in school begins with the student's family and connecting family members to resources such as affordable health care and counseling. The goal is to remove barriers to learning. If a child is in need of medical care for a sore tooth or poor eyesight, concentrating in the classroom will prove difficult. "We need to focus on what's right for the family and start from there," says Montana Superintendent of the Year Joel Voytoski. "Yet our frustration is that these services are often the first to get cut."

In Iowa City, Iowa Superintendent of the Year Lane Plugge hired case managers to coordinate the district's health services: "Our community is very involved in this — 250 people came together to plan this and that has been one of our biggest innovations."

Areas ripe for transformation

- Educating students who come from poverty
- Assessments
- Differentiated instruction
- Early learning programs
- High schools
- Teaching as a profession
- Customization of education for each student
- Further development of the growth model
- Overhauling the agrarian calendar

Some superintendents express concern that rural districts with similar needs for low-income families may not be able to attract outside dollars as much as urban districts. “We have three social workers between Nome and Fairbanks,” says Alaska Superintendent of the Year Norman Eck. “They are spread very thin. We have no law enforcement. We’re out of sight, out of mind. It’s not hopeless, but that’s the reality we face.”

Although Hall represents one of the largest districts in the country, she agrees. “It can be very tough. These programs are critical to success, and I hope Secretary of Education Arne Duncan funds this work.”

Other critical interventions to improving student achievement include early childhood programs, freeing up principals to serve as instructional leaders, high-quality professional development for teachers and growing local talent to sustain reforms. Several superintendents underscored the importance of attracting outside resources to help implement change — as Atlanta Public Schools has been able to do so successfully over the last several years.

Race to the Top:

What Does the Funding Mean for School Districts?

Race to the Top, which totals \$4 billion in federal funds, is the largest competitive education grant in U.S. history. The federal grant provides incentives to cash-strapped states to put in place large-scale school improvements that increase student achievement, narrow the learning gap, and strengthen high school graduation and college enrollment rates. States that apply for the dollars must focus on four areas: enhancing standards and assessments; increasing teacher effectiveness and greater equity in teacher distribution; improving the collection and use of data; and turning around low-performing schools.

At a time when states are facing massive budget cuts, the infusion of new funding is a welcome boost. However, many attending the 2009 AASA National Superintendent of the Year Forum question exactly what these new dollars could mean for their school districts.

“So much of this happens when you have policymakers who don’t consult with educators enough and make major legislative changes that affect schools,” says Massachusetts Superintendent of the Year Anthony Bent. Still others worry states would reduce state funding and replace those dollars with Race to the Top money.

Is Race to the Top Too Prescriptive?

Some superintendents question the new federal funding’s prescriptive nature. “You know, it’s a one-size-fits-all when we’re preaching just the opposite,” says Arizona Superintendent of the Year Virginia McElyea.

Others question whether states read the fine print. “We’re signing up for common core standards, but do we really know what those look like?” asks Plugge.

2005 Superintendent of the Year Monte Moses, a presenter at this year’s forum, puts it this way: “There will be general agreement from the start but as folks get into the nitty-gritty, they’ll say, ‘I didn’t know I signed up for that.’ Some states want the money so much that they’re acting as if the obstacles that are so big don’t even exist.”

“There’s a feeling that our states are more attracted to the money instead of the school reform included in Race to the Top — and that’s because all of our states are struggling for dollars.”

*Juli DiChiro, Oregon
Superintendent of the Year*

Questions were raised about what Race to the Top dollars mean for districts that are seeing increased achievement but may be using strategies not endorsed in the federal program. In Tennessee, the state’s superintendent of the year Wayne Miller worries that his district’s popular health occupations program will get cut. The successful program has a 100-percent graduation rate with most students pursuing a career in high-demand health-related fields. Many of these students graduate from high school just one credit shy of becoming an EMT. “They will no longer have time to take their health classes and earn their health certificates in order to do what Race to the Top says we need to do,” says Miller. The superintendent says the program also has helped keep kids in school who might otherwise drop out.

Miller also expects that Advanced Placement classes will be scaled back if his district receives the new federal funding. “We have six AP classes, which is unheard of in a small district like ours. But if I have to hire a new math teacher, the first place I’m going to look is at that AP class. We don’t have the dollars to do both. We’ll likely cut those AP classes in half to pay the costs of a new math teacher.”

Rhode Island’s Superintendent of the Year Edward Mara also raised concerns related to assessments. In 2005, Rhode Island, Vermont and New Hampshire formed a consortium to vastly improve their statewide tests. Much time and money were invested in identifying what the NECAP should measure and making sure the tests aligned with national standards.

Teachers, administrators and other specialists helped craft the assessments, which leaders hoped would be a model for the rest of the country. “We spent a lot of time tweaking it and improving the assessments,” says Mara. “Now after all of this work has

Which states will win Race to the Top funds?

State applications will be judged on the following criteria:

- A state’s plan for developing great teachers
- A demonstration of the state’s overall reform agenda
- The quality of the state’s educational standards and assessments
- The general quality of the application
- A state’s plan for turning around low-performing schools
- A state’s plan to promote innovation and reform
- The quality of the state’s education data systems
- The state’s plan for improving STEM

been done, we're being told there will be a national assessment. Some states — like us — already have done the work that the feds think we should do."

DiChiro sums it up this way: "There's a feeling that our states are more attracted to the money instead of the school reform included in Race to the Top — and that's because all of our states are struggling for dollars."

Rural Schools Left Out?

A number of superintendents from small rural school districts are concerned that the Race to the Top strategies tend to favor urban districts and the particular challenges these districts face. "I don't minimize that, but most kids are not in those large, urban districts," says Miller. "The solution for our kids is far different than a large urban area like Los Angeles or even Memphis. We're lost. I'm telling you that small rural districts are just lost in the fray."

Only 150 districts in the country have more than 40,000 kids, according to AASA Executive Director Daniel Domenech. "Rural districts are getting totally left out. I just got a message from a superintendent in Wyoming in a district of 450 kids and he asked, 'Doesn't Arne Duncan think I have poverty here?'"

Creating Effective Teachers and District Leaders

Strategies to attract effective teachers and fire bad ones were high on the priority list for superintendents at the forum. Race to the Top requires states to explain how they would improve teacher effectiveness. Some superintendents attending advocate for eliminating teacher tenure and giving district leaders more authority to fire bad teachers.

A related challenge is coming to a common definition of a highly effective teacher. What are the common characteristics? "How I rate a highly effective teacher may be different from how you would rate that same teacher," says Hall. "In Atlanta Public Schools, we are very clear about our definition of effective teachers and how we train our principals to document in a clear, transparent way whether teachers are effective."

"The solution for our kids is far different than a large urban area like Los Angeles or even Memphis."

*Wayne Miller, Tennessee
Superintendent of the Year*

"I don't want us to come across as the voice of no. Ultimately, tell us what the goal is, let us decide how to get there, and then hold us accountable."

*2009 AASA National
Superintendent of the Year
Beverly Hall*

Effective administrators also matter, according to Race to the Top. "We need to own that piece," says Iowa Superintendent of the Year Plugge. "We need to say what effective leadership looks like and how to measure it — otherwise someone will do it for us."

Despite the challenges raised by superintendents attending the forum, some call for thinking about implementing Race to the Top in ways that make the most sense for their students and districts. "I don't want us to come across as the voice of no," urges Hall. "Instead, let me tell you as an educator what would make sense for the growth model. Ultimately, tell us what the goal is, let us decide how to get there, and then hold us accountable."

Questions about Race to the Top funds

- Is this the beginning of a national curriculum?
- Will we see a loss of local and state control?
- Is this an overdependence on one-time federal resources?
- Will this create more red tape for states and districts?
- Who wins or loses at the national and state levels?
- Which school districts will participate?
- What happens in school districts that are already succeeding?
- What level of readiness is being developed across the nation?

State-Level Support for Education Improvement

Transforming a school district can be enhanced — or hindered — by the role of the state’s education agency, say superintendents. Some district leaders discussed ways their state education agencies are working with them to implement reform rather than in a more punitive manner. Arkansas Superintendent of the Year Jerry Guess shares this example, noting extra help from the top: “We have a new state education commissioner who was the executive director of our statewide superintendent association. The governor’s mandate to him was restore this notion of, ‘How can we be of service to you? We’re still going to have to enforce standards ... but we want to help you get there.’”

Superintendents also acknowledge that many state education agencies are understaffed and limited in what they can do for districts. “Our state department of education went from 200 people to 80 people and yet the work has grown so much more — there’s no way they can support anyone with the workload they have,” says Mara. “They are being asked to do everything and they last three to four years because they burn out. You used to have teams from the state education department that you could call to come to your district to help. It’s now an impossible task.”

Wisconsin Superintendent of the Year Jon Bales notes that the new administration has been relatively quiet on the issue of state education departments: “I’m a little surprised that the feds have not yet taken on state departments of education. [The legislature doesn’t] want it to work — so they don’t give it the resources it needs to work.”

In Arkansas, the education budget can’t be cut by the legislature because K–12 is guaranteed an adequate funding level, which is a result of the state’s adequacy lawsuit, according to Guess. “The legislature is on a mission to control spending and asking us what we are doing with these dollars. How long before we — superintendents — become state employees? Superintendents in my state are rapidly becoming so responsible and responsive to the state education commissioner that they are not answering as much to local school boards.”

In Arizona, the state's superintendent organization is playing a leadership role in advocating for funding for K–12 education, according to McElyea. “It organized a rally at the state legislature to talk about what we needed to do and what the impact was really going to be in schools after the state education department said one thing and we said that's not really what it's going to look like in the school. We got more funding as a result.”

What's working well? Mara says in Rhode Island, education leaders formed a legislative committee and hired a legislative analyst — who is a former superintendent. The analyst spends his time with legislators and alerts the committee to what's happening at the state capitol as well as issues that committee members may need to testify on. “We also meet with key legislators,” says Mara. “We talk about our agenda and theirs. How can we support each other? For example, we want to lengthen the school day to seven hours. How can we do that?”

Ongoing, timely and relevant communications help too, says Mara. “Our state education commissioner will send a weekly e-mail. It's brief and talks about what's coming up for the week. It also lets us know if there's action we need to take. At least we know from one source about the important stuff that's coming up. And this is the information we can pass on to others in the district.”

Re-tooling the state education department

Former superintendent Chris Nicastro offers an interesting perspective in her new role as Missouri's Commissioner of Education. Her first day on the job she quickly learned that she had “no people, no budget and no control.” The state legislature controls her budget and Nicastro answers to the state board of education. She is only the second school district superintendent to hold the position and the first woman: “I represent significant change. Don't hire me unless that's what you want.”

Nicastro shared steps she is taking to institute transformational change in her agency:

- Engage in and foster systemic thinking.
- Find a balance; push for change while protecting those values worth preserving.
- Demand results and focus on strategies with a proven record.
- Instill a sense of urgency.
- Manage disequilibrium; be resilient and relentless.

Conclusion

Those attending the Denver forum return to their communities armed with new best practices and the knowledge that they are not alone in their efforts to ensure all students succeed. “Meetings like this are a healing process after getting so many battle scars,” says Massachusetts Superintendent of the Year Bent. “Sometimes in [Natchez-Adams School District], I feel like my only cheerleaders are my wife and two daughters. You do need to have someone help pick you up and dust you off. I so appreciate that from this group.”

The commitment and dedication expressed by those attending the forum will provide needed inspiration and more resolve as participants return to their respective states. Leaders such as Nicastro urge her colleagues to be even more assertive in pushing for what is right for kids. “There is no better group to advocate for kids than superintendents, and somehow we forget that role and marginalize our colleagues who do promote their districts. There’s something to be said about that. We need to be much more aggressive than sitting back and saying, ‘Oh, no, what are they going to do to us next?’”

Guess agreed. “We can’t let the negative get us down. And even though people dabble in our business — and some have a reason to dabble — we need to make sure that we push them in the right ways. We have to remember that our most important mission is the kids.”

For more information about the AASA National Superintendent of the Year program, please contact Sharon Mullen at smullen@asa.org or 703-875-0717.

2009 State Superintendents of the Year

*The AASA National Superintendent of the Year Program is in its 22nd year
and is co-sponsored by AASA, ARAMARK Education and ING.*

Congratulations to the following leaders who were selected as the 2009 state superintendents of the year:

Alabama	Suzanne K. Freeman	Trussville City Schools
Alaska	Norman Eck	Northwest Arctic Borough School District
Arizona	Virginia B. McElyea	Deer Valley Unified School District 97
Arkansas	Jerry Guess	Camden-Fairview School District 16
California	Thelma Melendez De Santa Ana	
Colorado	Justin Mills	North Clackamas School District
Connecticut	Frank H. Sippy	Pomperaug Regional School District 15
Delaware	Kevin E. Carson	Woodbridge School District
Florida	Joseph G. Joyner	St Johns County School District
Georgia	Beverly L. Hall	Atlanta Public Schools
Idaho	Jerry Keane	Post Falls School District 273
Illinois	Mark R. Friedman	
Indiana	Eugene G. White	Indianapolis Public School District
Iowa	Lane E. Plugge	Iowa City Community School District
Kansas	John M. Heim	Emporia Unified School District 253
Kentucky	Stuart Silberman	Fayette County Public Schools
Louisiana	Gayle G. Sloan	St Tammany Parish Public Schools
Maine	Eileen King	Boothbay-Boothbay Hrbr CSD 3
Maryland	Michael J. Martirano	St Mary's County Public Schools
Massachusetts	Anthony J. Bent	Masconomet Regional School District
Michigan	Roxanne DeWeerd	
Minnesota	Dennis L. Peterson	Minnetonka School District 276
Mississippi	Anthony L. Morris	Natchez-Adams School District
Missouri	Chris L. Nicastro	Missouri Dept of Education
Montana	Joel L. Voytoski	Evergreen School District 50
Nebraska	Keith W. Lutz	Millard Public Schools
Nevada	Paul Dugan	Washoe County School District
New Hampshire	Nathan S. Greenberg	School Administrative Unit 12
New Jersey	Dominick A. Potena	
New Mexico	R.L. Richards	Texico Municipal Schools
New York	Mary Alice Price	Pittsford Central School District
North Carolina	Terry K. Holliday	Kentucky Department of Education
North Dakota	Steven Swiontek	Devils Lake School District 1
Oklahoma	David Goin	Edmond Public Schools Ind. District 12
Oregon	Juli DiChiro	Ashland School District 5
Pennsylvania	James C. Manley	
Rhode Island	Edward P. Mara	Bristol Warren Regional School District
South Carolina	James A. Littlefield	Spartanburg County School District One
South Dakota	David P. Peters	Spearfish School District 40-2
Tennessee	Wayne Miller	Lenoir City School District
Utah	McKell Withers	Salt Lake City School District
Vermont	Michael R. Deweese	Chittenden Central Supervisory Union
Virginia	Deborah Jewell-Sherman	Harvard Graduate School of Education
Washington	Mark S. Johnson	Nooksack Valley School District 506
West Virginia	Harold L. Hatfield	Putnam County School District
Wisconsin	Jon R. Bales	DeForest Area School District
Wyoming	Kevin Mitchell	Park County School District 1
AAIE	Edwin Ladd	American School of Doha

About the AASA National Superintendent of the Year Program

Established in 1988, the AASA National Superintendent of the Year Award recognizes outstanding leadership among superintendents. State selection committees choose the state winners and a national blue ribbon panel selects four finalists from whom the AASA National Superintendent of the Year is chosen. The 2009 AASA National Superintendent of the Year is Beverly Hall of Atlanta Public Schools.



American Association of School Administrators

AASA NATIONAL SUPERINTENDENT OF THE YEAR PROGRAM

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