

Leadership *for* Change

National Superintendent
of the Year Forum

2010



American Association of School Administrators



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About American Association of School Administrators

The American Association of School Administrators, founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 10,000 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](https://twitter.com/AASAHQ). Become a fan of the AASA Facebook page at www.facebook.com/AASApage.

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Introduction

In December 2010, the American Association of School Administrators invited state superintendents of the year to gather in Washington, D.C., for three days of dialogue about effective strategies to turn around low-performing schools. Representing a diverse mix of rural, urban and suburban districts, state award winners shared best practices and talked candidly about lessons learned as they led major transformation in their school districts. While their approaches varied, the end result was improved learning, teaching and achievement for students.

This publication highlights strategies for success from those attending the National Superintendent of the Year Forum. AASA wishes to thank the superintendents who participated. We are hopeful we have captured your observations with the same vigor and integrity with which you shared them.

The 95/5 Dilemma

Even though most school districts in the United States average 2,000 students, low-performing, large urban school districts often drive the education reform agenda — what gets funded and how public education is perceived by the public. AASA Executive Director Dan Domenech calls it the 95/5 dilemma: “The conversation is not that *only* 5 percent of our schools are failing. What you hear is that *every* school in America is failing and it’s simply not true.”

Domenech points to successes:

- The national high school graduation rate has increased to 75 percent.
- The class of 2008 had 120,000 more graduates than the class of 2001.
- African American, Hispanic and Native American graduation rates are improving the fastest.
- There were 261 fewer “dropout factories” in 2008 than in 2002.
- The graduation rate in 29 states substantially increased from 2002 to 2008.

Domenech readily acknowledges there is much work to do to improve public education. The problem of high school dropout factories is real. Data show 1.2 million students who enter ninth grade each year fail to graduate from high school with their peers four years later. “That’s 7,000 students lost each school day, and more than half of those students are from minority groups,” says Domenech.

The issue is not to ignore these challenges but to challenge those who would suggest that *all* public schools are bad or that specific strategies to turn around large urban high schools work just as well for small rural high schools. “We know that 2,000 high schools are responsible for 40 percent of dropouts,” he says. The good news: U.S. Census Bureau data show the high school dropout rate has been declining since 1972, and high school completion rates are “trending upward.”

Domenech also points to National Assessment Educational Progress scores for fourth-grade and eighth-grade math and reading, which are the highest they have ever been. He also discounts comparisons

Keeping Students in School

AASA is partnering with America’s Promise Alliance to address dropout prevention. The Alliance’s Grad Nation is a national movement to mobilize Americans to end the high school dropout crisis and prepare young people for college and the 21st century workforce. AASA’s 2010 National Superintendent of the Year Betty Morgan is Grad Nation’s new executive director: “My goal is to get 90 percent of high school kids graduating,” she says. For more information, see www.americaspromise.org/Our-Work/Grad-Nation.aspx.

between the United States and high-achieving countries such as Finland. “Finland is the size of Montana with the same size population, and it’s white middle class. There’s no comparison.”

Domenech notes that two-thirds of students enrolled in the European education model are in vocational education but those students are not tested. “Let’s take the top 30 percent of our kids and compare them to other countries and then see how we do,” he says.

Domenech urges greater focus on teacher tenure reform, firing ineffective teachers and improving the quality of statewide tests — especially requiring more states to explore tying student achievement to educators’ job performance. “Don’t force us to administer tests that are not valid and reliable. Why would we want to use those tests to then evaluate teachers?”

South Carolina Superintendent of the Year Valerie Truesdale shares Domenech’s concerns. “I have a real problem with veteran teachers who don’t use technology or new teaching methods,” she says. “We have to address the seniority issue on a national level.”

Iowa Superintendent of the Year Jere Vyverberg also underscores the importance of mentoring aspiring leaders. Vyverberg is mentoring three education leaders through a comprehensive program offered by the School Administrators of Iowa (visit www.sai-iowa.org), which is funded by the Wallace Foundation. “We have specific goals and standards that we use to measure progress,” says Vyverberg. “It’s as beneficial to me as it is to them. We have rich conversations.”

“Too many people are getting ‘drive-by’ mentoring instead of really honing in on their craft,” adds Rob Winter, Kansas Superintendent of the Year.

Domenech urges his colleagues to be proud of what has been accomplished, challenge the notion that *all* schools are failing and focus on what work remains to be done. That message struck a chord with many, including Michigan Superintendent of the Year David Campbell. “There’s a lack of appreciation for the importance of public education,” he says. “In our state, we’re building bridges so the community sees the value, and we work very hard to build trust and understanding.”

The 95/5 Dilemma

To learn more about the 95/5 dilemma, visit <http://tinyurl.com/23xt5np>. For more information about AASA’s advocacy and policy work, visit www.aasa.org/PolicyAndAdvocacy.aspx.

A Conversation with U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan

The nation's top superintendents offered candid advice to U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan about turnaround schools, teacher tenure and communicating a more positive message about public education. The 40-minute conversation was the culmination of the superintendents' three-day forum about improving struggling schools as public education experiences record budget cuts.

"You are being asked to do more with less resources," Duncan told the superintendents in his opening remarks. "It takes great courage and creativity. And it will get tougher."

Superintendents are seeing deeper rifts between school boards and district leaders as tough decisions are made about budget priorities. "Relationships between the board and the superintendent will be harder to maintain," says Montana Superintendent of the Year Darlene Schottle. "When times were good, we were passing bonds. When we ask for a mill levy increase now, the response is 'How could you dare?' It's impacting folks' relationships."

Florida Superintendent of the Year Margaret Smith calls doing more with less "the new normal."

The Obama administration has proposed investing another \$900 million in public education for fiscal year 2011. Since President Obama took office, Congress has invested more than \$4 billion into the country's lowest-performing schools — that's in addition to Race to the Top funding.

Communicating a more positive message about public education

Duncan has pledged to turn around 5,000 schools in five years. The majority of schools currently engaged in turnaround work are high schools followed by elementary schools and then middle schools. Duncan, the former Chicago Public Schools superintendent, says he supports more flexibility if schools are successful. The goal, he says, is to reward schools that are meeting their targets or showing tremendous growth over time. Schools that fail to see improvements would have less flexibility.

Minnesota Superintendent of the Year Patricia Jo Phillips of North St. Paul, urged Duncan to look closely at the work of the 29

superintendents attending the forum and others who are improving student achievement. “Over the last three days, I have heard repeated stories of superheroes in this room who have phenomenal stories to share,” says Phillips. “We need the public to hear these positive stories.”

Superintendents expressed frustration that the media unfairly paint *all* public schools in a negative light. This, in turn, has affected the business community’s perception of public education and even those considering teaching or the superintendency. “We need to attract people to this profession, and it’s hard,” says Pennsylvania Superintendent of the Year Amy Sichel. “We need a more positive message about public education at a national level. You need to stand up and work with us.”

“I try to use the bully pulpit to tell the truth and when we’re successful,” Duncan says. “And I’ll also be honest about where we need to improve. The more we can talk about extraordinary superintendents, teachers and whole states raising the bar on closing the gaps — the better.”

New Mexico Superintendent of the Year Karen Couch pushed Duncan and other federal leaders to embrace President Obama’s campaign theme of hope and change in the context of public education. “I would like you to acknowledge that there’s hope for our public schools. By and large, the majority of schools are successful. Please acknowledge that we are making progress.”

Defining the growth model

Some superintendents also asked Duncan whether the federal government would develop a common, national definition of a growth model to measure student progress. Some noted that states vary widely on how they define growth. They also cautioned Duncan that any federally crafted definition of academic growth must be fair and focused on multiple measures. “Everyone is in favor of a growth model, but not a model that assures that a percentage of students fail,” says Indiana Superintendent of the Year Terry Thompson.

“Absolute test scores tell you a little bit and mislead you a lot,” Duncan says. “I want to know where a child is now and where [that child is] going. We want to move strongly in the direction of a growth model and reauthorize [the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act] by August. I don't think there is one perfect growth model out there now."

Duncan urges superintendents to weigh in on ESEA Reauthorization: A Blueprint for Reform at www.ed.gov. The blueprint for revising ESEA provides incentives for states to adopt academic standards that prepare students to succeed in college and the workplace, and to create accountability systems that measure student growth. "I'd like your honest feedback on the blueprint," he says. "I think we have a good chance to reauthorize — this may be the only issue the Republicans and Democrats can come together on." (Superintendents can send comments to arneduncan@ed.gov.)

Tackling teacher tenure

Superintendents also raised the issue of teacher tenure with Duncan, with one superintendent calling it "the number one barrier" to ensuring that every child has an effective teacher. Michigan Superintendent of the Year Campbell suggests that EduJobs money should have been tied to states and districts willing to take on the hard work of teacher tenure reform.

"We are pushing unions hard," Duncan says. "This is not about beating unions down. It's about unions and management coming together. Baltimore is a good example; basically, tenure is gone and the tradeoff is great. Teachers can make a heck of a lot more money early in their career."

Duncan says the department considered adding tenure reform to the EduJobs bill but says the votes for passing such a measure were fragile. "I don't think we would have gotten it. We did have those tough conversations."

Concerns expressed with competitive grants

Some superintendents encouraged Duncan to tap the money used for competitive grants to fund the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities. "This would help free up our general fund money so we can do some creative things," says Paul Shaw, Georgia Superintendent of the Year. "It would save a lot of jobs, too."

ESEA Reauthorization: A Blueprint for Reform

View the blueprint at www.ed.gov and weigh in by contacting U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan at arneduncan@ed.gov.

Duncan says the issue is a constant debate, pointing out that 75 percent of federal grants are still formula-based. “We are asking for an increase in dollars for IDEA, but not at the exclusion of everything we’re trying to do. If we perpetuate the status quo, we won’t get the kind of breakthroughs we want to see.”

Superintendents Share Views with U.S. Education Secretary

In a candid conversation with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, state superintendents of the year shared several observations, including:

- Focus on what benefits students, not politics.
- Ensure that a national definition of academic growth is fair and based on multiple measures.
- Focus on block grants not competitive grants.
- Provide superintendents with greater leverage to address teacher tenure and seniority.
- Spread the word about compelling turnaround stories in districts across the country.
- Avoid painting public education with one negative brush or a one-size-fits-all school turnaround model.
- Create a national data warehouse so similar schools in different school districts can share best practices.
- Increase local flexibility for turnaround schools.
- Scale up opportunities for mentorships in instructional leadership.

Turning Around Schools for the Long Term: A Success Story

When Betty Morgan arrived as the new superintendent in Washington County, Maryland, in 2001, she was shocked to find the district was second only to Baltimore public schools in achievement — the district she had previously worked in as an area superintendent.

More than 40 percent of Washington County's nearly 22,000 students qualify for the federal lunch program and per pupil spending ranks toward the bottom in the state. Located 90 minutes northwest of Washington, D.C., the rural district is physically isolated by the bordering Appalachian Mountains. "People depend on themselves and they are extremely distrusting of strangers," Morgan says.

Until Morgan arrived, most superintendents came and left within three years. Morgan's staying power is evident as she completes 10 years as the district's superintendent. She was awarded AASA's highest honor as National Superintendent of the Year in 2010. Her compelling story offers keen insights in turning around some of the most challenging schools.

A world-class education for all

Morgan and her school board had a vision to provide a world-class education to students, which they defined as:

- Everyone operating at peak performance
- Continually striving for improved workplaces and processes
- Achieving excellent customer and stakeholder involvement and satisfaction

Detractors roundly criticized the lofty vision. "Who do they think they are — 'a world-class school system'?" recalls Morgan. But the critics didn't stop Morgan and the school board from moving forward. They pushed themselves to think in new ways to accelerate learning and they identified five concepts for success. (Contact AASA's Sharon Mullen at smullen@aasa.org for a copy of Morgan's detailed presentation.)

WASHINGTON COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Five Concepts for Accelerating Student Achievement

- Delineate specific outcomes.
- Develop human capital/people resources.
- Create a culture of high expectations/no excuses.
- Monitor what is important to the system.
- Pursue innovations that can yield returns for students.

Concept One: Delineate specific outcomes.

Morgan and school board members began with the end in mind: What does success look like? They developed clear outcomes for students and staff. More emphasis was placed on collaborating as a team. “The main issue was getting people to buy in to a central value, which was a ‘no excuses’ school system,” says Morgan.

The district held focus groups to identify shared values. Staff, parents and community members were asked a common question: In the best of all possible worlds, what should our kids in the Appalachian Mountains have? The wide-ranging responses included elementary magnet schools and high schools with specific areas of emphasis such as foreign language, environmental education and International Baccalaureate.

Morgan also knew that “what gets resourced gets done.” The district invested \$1 million in high school dropout prevention. “Our investment has paid for itself, thanks to the numbers of students now graduating from high school.” In 2010, the district boasted a 92 percent high school graduation rate, up from 72 percent in 2001. The college-going population has increased 23 percentage points.

Concept Two: Develop human capital/people resources.

Effective leadership became a major focus beginning with the district’s 1,700 teachers and 170 administrators followed by classified staff. “We focused on leadership skills for everyone. Our classified staff now has in-service five times a year. Now the bus driver says, ‘How are your grades? I hope you are going to college!’” The goal was simple: Change the district’s culture of low expectations for students starting from the inside out.

District employees agreed to focus on what matters most; use resources to accomplish goals; and offer feedback to increase productivity. Even the superintendent’s leadership role came under scrutiny. “We asked, ‘What is my purpose as superintendent, as a leader?’ I’ve been very aggressive about raising money to put our reforms in place and to keep the lions from the door,” says Morgan.

Other leadership incentives were put in place. The Teacher Leadership Responsibility Program encourages teachers to develop creative and innovative leadership activities that support student or teacher learning. For example, teachers might provide professional

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— 2010 AASA National
Superintendent of the Year
Betty Morgan

development to others; lead a study group on a pedagogical issue relevant to the school or district; or serve as acting principal, a mentor or demonstration teacher. Teachers can accumulate points that result in stipends.

Morgan says these key elements were critical to success:

- Change from the “inside out”
- Everyone acting as a leader
- Self-discipline and self-auditing
- Managing your own morale
- Leading vs. managing
- Everyone in the right seat in the boat rowing in the same direction
- Organizational flow
- Recruiting quality staff

Concept Three: Create a culture of high expectations/no excuses.

To create a culture of high expectations, district leaders implemented other changes such as a code of conduct; a dress code; an academic integrity policy; an anti-bullying policy; and a civility initiative in every school. Laying the foundation for these efforts was P.M. Forni’s book, *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct*. The staff was urged to think the best, respect even a subtle no, and give and accept constructive criticism — among other principles of civility. Morgan and the school board also addressed bigger issues of civility throughout the community: “Every major organization in our community now has embraced civility,” she says.

Instructional practice and data collection were also central to the district’s classroom-focused improvement process. “We review data regularly,” says Morgan. “We look at patterns, strengths and weaknesses.” The district has carved out additional time for teachers to reflect before they begin their next teaching segment. “Principals will listen, observe and comment as needed but it’s all teacher-led with a heavy focus on instruction,” she says.

Here’s a before-and-after look at how strategies in Washington County’s public schools have evolved under Morgan’s leadership:

“We asked, ‘What is my purpose as superintendent, as a leader?’ I’ve been very aggressive about raising money to put our reforms in place and to keep the lions from the door.”

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<u>Typical School Improvement:</u>	<u>Class-Focused Improvement:</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process established at district level • Linear and prescriptive • Annual strategic plan • Impact on total school • School improvement team develops • Purpose: Meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) • Results determined at the end of the year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process designed at team level • Non-linear/non-prescriptive • Short-cycle strategic plan • Impact on students in class • Grade-level team develops • Purpose: Adjust instructional practices • Results determined when unit is taught

Concept Four: Monitor what is important to the system.

The district developed benchmark assessments and matched them to specific learning objectives. Results, stored online, were analyzed by student achievement specialists and department chairs to identify the interventions needed most. Simple, color-coded data charts in green, yellow and red quickly give teachers a visual snapshot of student progress. Students who need extra help stand out in red.

“This is a huge part of our work,” says Morgan. “Teachers can call up any information and data they want on an individual student right on their computers.” As a result, more effective teaching strategies have been developed and are shared districtwide. While teachers have access to student-level data, “dashboards” offer big-picture data points for the entire district, including leading indicators and the latest benchmarks.

The superintendent says district leaders ask these questions daily to determine whether they are improving:

- What are we accomplishing? (Goals)
- What results are we trying to achieve? (Outcomes)
- How are we measuring improvement? (Assessment and Accountability)

Every school now has a student achievement specialist. The position was created specifically to help teachers ensure that individual student progress was improving. Morgan calls it “one of our top five best strategies” to increase achievement. Specialists focus on coaching and mentoring, professional development, data analysis, lesson plan review, intervention and enrichment.

Concept Five: Pursue innovations that can yield returns for students.

The workday for teachers in the district's lowest-performing schools has been extended to allow staff to brainstorm and plan staff development. Teachers in these schools are paid for an extra half hour every day of the school week.

The district also has restructured many of its schools. Increasingly, schools are centered on a specific theme or area of emphasis such as the arts or environmental education. There are more magnet schools and more advanced study opportunities in science, technology and math. The district also started an International Baccalaureate program — one of just a handful in the state. (Visit www.wcps.k12.md.us/ for details.)

The district's strategies are getting results and national attention. "We are now listed among the best high schools in the country — that's a first. Four of our high schools made *U.S. News and World Report's* list, and two high schools made *Newsweek* two years in a row — in 2009 and 2010. We also have kids graduating with about a year of college under their belts," she says.

For Morgan, it is simple: "Our mission is that you can't have a failing school."

"Our mission is that you can't have a failing school."

— 2010 AASA National Superintendent of the Year
Betty Morgan

AASA Releases 10-Year Study on the American School Superintendent

State superintendents of the year learned about dramatic changes in public school leadership during the release of AASA's study on the state of the superintendency.

Highlights:

- The work portfolio of America's superintendents is increasingly diverse, encompassing not only student achievement but the diversification of student and staff populations; the explosion of technology; expanded expectations from the government, the school board and community; and the globalization of society.
- Job satisfaction among superintendents remains high.
- Only about half of respondents said they planned to still be a superintendent in 2015 — suggesting substantial turnover in the next few years.
- The percentage of female superintendents has increased substantially since 1992. In this study, nearly one in four respondents was a woman — or 24 percent. In 2000, the percentage was 13.
- Non-minority group respondents more often entered the superintendency before the age of 46 than did their peers in the minority group.
- Minority respondents were twice as likely as their non-minority peers to report encountering discrimination in their pursuit of the superintendency.

The landmark study is based on a survey of nearly 2,000 school superintendents. *The American School Superintendent: 2010 Decennial Study* can be purchased at www.rowmaneducation.com.

What Works: Turnaround School Strategies

Across the country, superintendents, teachers, principals, parents and community members are working together to improve learning and instruction for students — and getting results. During the State Superintendent of the Year Forum, superintendents of the year from three school districts were invited to share their stories.

Cross Country School District in Arkansas *Matt McClure, Superintendent*

Shortly after Matt McClure accepted the superintendent's job of Cross Country School District in Arkansas, a high poverty school district of 700 students in a rural agricultural community, seven new board members took office and the state placed the district in "fiscal distress."

"We cut 14.5 positions to balance our budget before I officially started the job," says McClure. "We got out from underneath that in a year — the fastest in the state's history."

The immense challenges forced McClure and the board to think hard about what they viewed as a successful school. McClure, his leadership team and school board studied the work of Jim Collins, Thomas Friedman and Ken Robinson. (See *Good Reads* on page 18 for books of interest.) "Schools were designed for the agricultural age but now the majority of the jobs are in the service and creative industries. We were going to make sure our kids were savvy in technology and were better-prepared when they graduated."

McClure also knew it was critical to reach out to parents, business leaders, elected officials and other stakeholders about how public schools could best prepare future graduates. "We don't live in a world as superintendents where we tell people what to do." The community identified these top five skills in the following order: problem-solve, use requisite technology, think analytically, collaborate and communicate.

The next step was taking a close look at how the district was teaching and assessing these skills in its schools. District leaders developed stronger, more meaningful content and assessments to measure progress. "The question we faced was can we prepare our students for the state exams and also prepare them with the skills necessary to succeed in the world they enter when they leave our

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— 2010 Arkansas

Superintendent of the Year

Matt McClure

schools? We sent parents, teachers and others all over the country to find districts that were doing this work well,” says McClure.

Another major challenge, says McClure, was helping teachers understand that they too had to change. “For example, the teacher is moving from standing in front of the classroom to really being a facilitator of learning.” Other improvements in instruction included resisting the temptation to tell; avoiding giving students the final product of their thinking; shifting to address the problem first and teaching second; and re-evaluating evaluation.

Teachers were critical to student success. “We are a merit pay district,” McClure says. “Our work to address pay for performance is funded by a federal Teacher Incentive Fund grant and a state grant totaling \$9 million. We use multiple measures for pay for performance: student achievement, attendance, professional growth (after school), evaluation and additional professional development.” McClure says that allowing teachers to be reflective about their work “was the most positive thing we did.”

The district has made significant progress on elementary and high school test scores. “We have doubled the number of kids who are proficient,” says McClure.

Next year, the district plans to combine more classes at the high school to better address 21st century learning. For example, communications, arts and music will be integrated into the curriculum in ways that make the subjects more relevant to students. Oral communications will be embedded into multiple classes and no longer an isolated, one-time speech class.

High school graduation requirements will increase, too — such as community service, student portfolios and senior projects requiring public presentations, and all students must submit an application to a post-secondary school or a career readiness certificate.

Beaufort County School District in South Carolina ***Valerie Truesdale, Superintendent***

Many of the public schools in the racially divided Beaufort County School District in South Carolina show 75 percent of their students live in poverty. In some schools, the numbers climb to more than 90 percent poverty. But Superintendent Valerie Truesdale is committed to ensuring that all children achieve — no matter what their circumstances.

Like her colleagues, she asked the community to help her envision what education in the district should look like. The district had already seen four superintendents come and go in four years. In fact, the assistant superintendent introduced Truesdale at her first Rotary meeting as “the superintendent for this year.” Truesdale quickly set out to change that perception by building relationships and trust. “We set as a goal to have learning — not politics — lead the way. I speak in a different church just about every Sunday.”

Truesdale placed heavy emphasis on professional development. “It is now based on what the data show us teachers need with a look at where students are not performing as they should be.” Thanks to a successful bond referendum, 75 math, literacy and technology coaches have been added, and every classroom has an interactive white board and clickers. “Getting teachers to use those materials required putting a technology coach in each school ... so they could have training.” Truesdale also added 20 extra days to the school year and she increased the diversity of school leadership teams.

The data told an interesting story as Truesdale began to think how to attract teachers to her most struggling schools. “If I took out our four lowest schools — all of them had 90 percent poverty — our rating would jump to excellent.” Truesdale increased the school year to 200 days for those four schools. Teachers who applied to work at the remote schools received extra pay.

Schools that meet state standards get a break for the holidays. “If you don’t meet the standards, we get our best teachers to teach the kids who have to come back over the break to help them meet the standards,” she says.

Even the dress code changed. “Lots of our kids like to wear sloppy clothes — low-slung pants,” she says. “So we talked about that. Twenty-five percent of our schools were in uniforms. Within two years, 100 percent of our kids were wearing uniforms.”

Schaumburg Community Consolidated School District 54 in Illinois

Ed Rafferty, Superintendent

Just three months on the job, Superintendent Ed Rafferty received what he describes as a major “wake-up call” at an event filled with elected officials and community leaders. “The mayor of Schaumburg introduced everyone except our board of education,” he says. “Our board was angry and asked the mayor after the event why he didn’t introduce them.” Rafferty says the mayor said he was embarrassed by the district’s poor performance. “He told them, ‘You’re not performing so until you get it together, I’m not introducing you.’ Looking back — he did us a big favor.”

Since then, the district’s 14,100 students have seen impressive gains in this suburban Chicago district where students speak more than 76 languages. “In Schaumburg, you’ll see data walls, data charts — it’s that transparent,” he says. “Our data is all over the place. We are not afraid of data anymore.”

Rafferty says the district is focused on three goals:

- Students who have been in the district for one year and who are enrolled by the third grade will read at grade level within one year.
- 90 percent of students will meet and exceed standards in every grade level.
- The achievement gap among sub-groups of students will be closed.

“We’re a pretty racially diverse community. We now have African-American students outperforming white students, and 2,100 more students meeting or exceeding standards since we began our work in professional learning communities,” he says. Previously, Rafferty described student achievement as “flat” with only 75 percent of students meeting standards.

Rafferty says the district's work is driven by the Professional Learning Community framework, which includes engaging students, teachers and administrators simultaneously in learning. "We now work collaboratively to achieve better results," he says. "We also have continuous job-embedded, building level professional development as well as a common language — that was huge. I'd ask, 'What's formative assessment?' and I'd get 27 different definitions. Not anymore."

In addition, the district has carved out uninterrupted blocks of learning time daily for student enrichment and intervention. Planning time also was increased by 20 minutes at the elementary level. "We can direct 50 percent of the time used by teachers — so we can require them to meet as teams and look at data. We developed district-level benchmarks at every level. We have improved the rigor of our tests."

Rafferty also incorporated business models. "We constantly hear from our business leaders — 'You're not accountable.' They talked about a 90-day success plan. So we are now on a 90-day school improvement review cycle. Schools have specific targets and goals they have to write. The 90-day review cycle for us has been huge." Rafferty and his assistant superintendents meet with every school team, which includes teachers, for 45 minutes on a regular basis and offer feedback and greater interventions based on the results.

"We know what works and it's just a matter of doing it," says Rafferty.

Good Reads

During the forum, superintendents mentioned these books as valuable in guiding their efforts:

- *Good to Great* by Jim Collins
- *Lincoln on Leadership* by Donald T. Phillips
- *Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative* by Ken Robinson
- *The Rise of the Creative Class* by Richard L. Florida
- *The World is Flat* by Thomas L. Friedman
- *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct* by P.M. Forni
- *Understanding by Design* by Grant P. Wiggins
- *Visible Learning* by John Hattie
- *Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything* by Stephen M.R. Covey
- *Leadership 101* by John C. Maxwell

Conclusion

Turning around a failing school takes commitment, resources and hard work. Superintendents across the country are on the front lines. They provide inspiration, hold staff accountable for results and know how to effectively work with their school boards and community. “The responsibility for student performance stops at my desk,” says Missouri Superintendent of the Year Ronald Lankford. “We are all committed to improving our districts.”

Superintendents tackle the challenges that public schools face head-on. Deepening budget cuts, a constantly shifting landscape of education reforms and divisive politics may present difficulty along the way. However, the superintendents of the year attending AASA’s forum — and their colleagues — are getting results. For them, it’s about leveraging the resources they have and augmenting those resources through volunteers, grant funding from foundations and other avenues. Their success stories offer important lessons and best practices as the national and state leaders consider what improvement strategies to pursue and how those strategies will be funded in tough economic times.

2010 State Superintendents of the Year

The National Superintendent of the Year Program is in its 23rd year and is co-sponsored by AASA, ARAMARK Education and ING.

Congratulations to the following leaders who were selected as the 2010 state superintendents of the year; those highlighted in bold attended the 2010 forum.

Alabama	Joyce C. Levey	Tuscaloosa City School System
Alaska	James A Hickerson	Bering Strait School District
Arizona	Nicholas I. Clement	Flowing Wells School District
Arkansas	Matt McClure	Cross Country School District
California	Virginia Peterson	Garvey School District
Colorado	Cynthia Stevenson	Jefferson County Public Schools
Connecticut	David G. Title	Bloomfield Public Schools
Delaware	Steven H. Godowsky	New Castle County Vo-Tec School District
Florida	Margaret A. Smith	Volusia County School District
Georgia	Paul A. Shaw	White County School System
Idaho	Candis R. Donicht	Moscow School District #281
Illinois	Edward F. Rafferty	Schaumburg Community Consolidated School District 54
Indiana	Terry J. Thompson	Metropolitan S.D. of Wayne Township
Iowa	Jere Vyverberg	Waverly-Shell Rock Community Schools
Kansas	Rob Winter	Salina Public Schools
Kentucky	Tim Hanner	Kenton County School District
Louisiana	John E. Bourque	Arcadia Parish School District
Maryland	Elizabeth Molina Morgan	Washington County Public Schools
Massachusetts	Nicholas D. Young	Hadley Public Schools
Michigan	David J. Campbell	Olivet Community Schools
Minnesota	Patricia Jo Phillips	N. St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale School District #622
Mississippi	Milton Kuykendall	DeSoto County School District
Missouri	Ronald Lankford	Deputy Commissioner, Missouri Department of Education
Montana	Darlene Schottle	Kalispell Public Schools
Nebraska	Steven K. Rector	South Sioux City Community School District
Nevada	Walt Rulffes	Clark County School District
New Hampshire	Michael J. Martin	School Administrative Unit #46
New Jersey	Raymond J. Brosel	Voorhees Township Public Schools
New Mexico	Karen M. Couch	Moriarty-Edgewood School District
New York	Louis N. Wool	Harrison Central School District
North Carolina	Donna Cox Peters	Montgomery County Schools
North Dakota	Michael K. Bradner	Mayville-Portland-Clifford-Galesburg School District
Ohio	Gregg E. Morris	Clark-Shawnee Local School District
Oklahoma	Deborah J. Arato	Moore School District
Oregon	Paula A. Radich	Newberg School District 29 J
Pennsylvania	Amy F. Sichel	Abington School District
Rhode Island	Robert M. O'Brien	Smithfield School System
South Carolina	Valerie Page Truesdale	Beaufort County School District
South Dakota	Donald Kirkegaard	Britton-Hecia School
Tennessee	Denise H. Brown	Unicoi County School System
Texas	Oscar Rodriguez, Jr.	Mission Consolidated Independent School District
Utah	Chris S. Sorensen	Nebo School District
Vermont	Daniel M. French	Bennington-Rutland Supervisory Union
Virginia	Fred S. Morton IV	Maggie L. Walker Governor's School
Washington	Steve Chestnut	Selah School District
West Virginia	William A. Niday	96 Wood County Schools
Wisconsin	Gerald R. Kember	La Crosse School District
Wyoming	Suzanne Belish	Sheridan County School District #1

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



American Association of School Administrators

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