

Bruce Hunter, who spent three decades as AASA's chief lobbyist from 1982 to 2013, started work with the association 16 months before the groundbreaking report "A Nation at Risk" was released. During his tenure, he saw the association's advocacy role become stronger and at times more strident as the federal government became increasingly involved in K-12 education.

In an interview with freelance writer Glenn Cook for AASA's 150th anniversary, Hunter talked about his role in the association's legislative victories and struggles, and the challenges it faces as the political process becomes more polarized.

Describe AASA's history around federal policy over the past 50 years, since Title I was issued.

"Jim Kirkpatrick was AASA's first real director of governmental relations, and he worked with Congress on a variety of issues — the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the federal role in the desegregation of schools, and Impact Aid.

"As the federal role changed, Title I became bigger and IDEA came online, the federal role in the day-to-day school business grew tremendously," Hunter says. "Joe saw this change coming, and he was an important transitional figure because he moved us toward taking more public, bolder stands and doing it through the members. He helped get more superintendents tuned into the idea of federal policy.

"Joe hired me and I worked with him for two years. I greatly admired him. He certainly made easy to follow in his footsteps."

You started to work at AASA in January 1982. The following May, "A Nation at Risk" was issued." How did that report, which was critical of the American education system and the effect it was having on student preparation for post-high school world, change or alter your work?

"'A Nation at Risk' gave the outside groups, the think tanks in Washington, a much louder voice. It was their first big foray into public policy and public opinion, and it put the education establishment — school boards, principals, AASA — back on our heels. But when you really analyze the report, most of what it was saying isn't true about the performance of our kids. Still, a lot of the recommendations did come to pass. Students have to take three to four years of math and science, and that's been the rule since the 1990s.

"What I find interesting is that the report did not call for more testing. That actually came later. But you could ask the question now, 'Does more make a difference?' Are kids actually learning more because they take more tests?"

What do you think AASA's biggest victory was during your tenure there?

“Our biggest victory was making AASA a player. It was hard to get anything done without having us on board. The people on Capitol Hill who were moving legislation knew that it meant something when we opposed or when we supported a piece of legislation.”

You had some nice successes, especially through the 1980s and ‘90s. You worked with the House and Senate to move authority over Title I and IDEA spending more to the local level. The LEAD program, which provided funding for training new and emerging administrators, was another victory, as was the Rural Education Achievement Program that provides grants to districts with less than 600 students with limited strings attached.

“We wanted to return control of Title I in particular to the local level, and we really did that by enlarging what is known as the schoolwide concept, which was an important shift,” Hunter says. “It wasn’t just one victory. It was over the course of three or four reauthorizations, but we got it done. We also slowly made the special education law more in tune with practice, making it easier for schools to work with parents while protecting kids.”

The biggest, longest, hardest fought legislative battle that AASA has waged in its history was over the No Child Left Behind Act, as the 2002 ESEA reauthorization is known. AASA was first among education groups to say the law, with its punitive focus on testing and accountability, would harm rather than help students and schools. Talk about that period and the pressure you felt.

“You really started to see changes in federal policy in the mid 1990s, after the Republican revolution changed the committee structure in Congress and eliminated the subcommittee staff. These were the people with the most knowledge about legislation and its impact and were attuned to what the leadership and the public wanted. At that point, however, this was when the think tanks started having more power, and by 2001, the Bush people were in place and they didn’t listen to what anyone said.

“We listened to our members, and we drew our line in the sand. We said the way it was drawn up wouldn’t work and it hasn’t and it doesn’t. We took terrible abuse for that because we were first and said it most forcefully. We were very specific about why we were doing it and why it would hurt our members. No one in Washington was happy with us, but we stuck to our guns, and by 2010 all the organizations were saying it was a bad law.”

It wasn’t easy, I’m sure.

“Washington is hostile to the nation, and the nation has become hostile to Washington,” Hunter says. “Since the turn of the century, every year we would take

our federal positions to Congress and found that the relationship was becoming more and more divorced. It moves a degree or two further every year.

“What we have always done best is bring our expertise to the table by bringing our members to the table. They are the people who know what federal legislation does to school district at the local level. But the Bush administration was listening only to the think tanks, and that has persisted through the Obama administration with a vengeance. They don’t have respect for the people who this impacts the most.

“I think these things are cyclical. I don’t think the nation is going down the drain or anything like that. I just hated that at the end of my time we just couldn’t get anything done because there was just no direction in Washington. I saw it happening and I felt it happening.”

Having worked with superintendents for more than three decades, what do you think about the profession as a whole?

“I have a great respect for the superintendency, and I grew fond of many, many people when I was at AASA. When you do the type of work that I did, you get to know them really well, and I knew that I could call them and they would respond.

“Our policy, more than any organization in Washington, was always shaped by top-flight leadership. We sought their opinions and carefully reflected those opinions even when they made us unpopular in Washington. And that brought us credibility. You know it meant something when we opposed or when we supported a piece of legislation. It still does.”