

Sarah Jerome spent 46 years in education, half of that time as a superintendent in the Kettle Marine School District in Wisconsin and in the Arlington Heights, Ill., district about 10 minutes from O'Hare Airport. She was the second woman to be president of AASA.

She was interviewed by freelance writer Glenn Cook for AASA's 150th anniversary edition. Here are excerpts from that interview.

Tell me about your work with AASA.

I joined in 1991 when I became a superintendent, and I'm currently a lifetime member. When I went to the meetings early on, I was struck by all the white males on the stage. There seemed to be very little attention to diversity or the representation of women in any of the programs or committees or offices. That certainly stuck with me.

AASA is an organization that serves a student population that is roughly a 50-50 male/female split. We have to be role models for all of those children and show them that women and men can be great leaders. So I made it my business to get more involved, and now women are better represented in the organization.

I think there been progress. There is a much more concerted effort to make sure minorities and women are encouraged to be part of AASA. You're seeing more participation on committee work, on the Governing Board and on the Executive Committee.

What was it like for you as a woman superintendent? Did you encounter any major challenges because of your gender?

Certainly the work is difficult, but I have had many wonderful mentors who were my white male colleagues. They were so generous with their time and support and advice. I feel very very grateful to them for their interest in helping me be successful. I wouldn't have been in the work at all with out their help. For both genders in this work, it's extremely important that we reach out to help people in the beginning of their careers to help them be successful.

You were on the Executive Committee during a time of true transition. What do you remember about the experience?

AASA has been going through a difficult transition, as have most of the major membership associations. We used to have national conferences of 20,000 attendees and now it's 2,500 so the focus is clearly different. That's what started coming into play when I was on the Executive Committee. Now we're definitely trying to make the event much more personal and tailored to the individual needs of the attendee. That's a goal of AASA and, frankly, of all groups hosting national

conferences. Everyone is paying very special attention to what the attendees want and need.

One of AASA's major assets is the dedication of its staff, and there are two people who I think have been stellar in meeting the mission of the organization. Jay Goldman has brought steady excellence over time to the communication medium of the organization. He's brought in voices and sent out voices to our membership, and that's extraordinarily important to our organization.

The other person is Sharon Adams Taylor and the advocacy role she plays. She has garnered lots of grants for the organization to help provide programs for children in need, whether it's her school health program advocacy or the attention she is helping bring to the dropout issue. It's vital to have a national organization like AASA to help intervene and be a real force for superintendents who are trying to make a difference in children's lives, and we're so well served in those two areas. They really have become pivotal points of the organization.

You come from a family of educators. How has that influenced you and how have you seen schools evolve over the years?

My parents were both educators. My dad was the principal of a rural school in North Carolina, and I heard many stories about how he would open the school door and start the fire in the furnace. They would begin the school day with a song for teachers and students, and at the end of the school day, he would clean up and lock the door.

That self-sufficiency is prevalent in the history of our schools. My mother was a teacher in Georgia and North Carolina, and she had a great deal of dedication. Both of my parents did. That is often the thing, the tie that holds our history together in public education. People have been drawn forever and ever for the love of children and the love of learning to education, and that's true from my dad's day to my son-in-law, who is beginning his first year as a new teacher. They do it out of caring for children and their development.

There are huge differences in how we approach things today. I spent several days in Arlington Heights with new teachers. Now they provide them with a mentor all year long to assure that they're going to be successful. It's a safety net for them. It's frustrating, though, because it's not consistent from district to district. My son-in-law is working in a classroom of 30 with 10 special education children, and he has no mentor and no help.

It's a dichotomy that's stark. Who knows if he'll make it through his first year or not? Sadly, we know better, but we do not always do better.

Why do you think that is the case?

We know what works in student learning. We know what works in teacher mentoring. We know what it takes for school boards to be successful. But we're not always of one mind on those things in the public sector.

I was a superintendent for 15 years in Wisconsin and 8 years in Illinois, and one of the things that helped me was that I was in suburban systems that cared a lot about education and supported it financially.

Look at teacher mentoring. The reason more districts don't do a better job of it is because of money and staffing. But it is shortsighted not to do that, because we're in an endless cycle of losing great teachers in their early years and having to constantly train new ones. It's a circuitous thing, but we could lessen that and keep talented people in the profession if we did it right when they first came in.

We are certainly impacted by what appears to be polarity in the nation, in part political party polarity. We seem to be so divided. Half of us believe in public education and think it's the only way to sustain the backbone of our democracy, while the other half believes it's fine to give tax dollars to private and parochial schools and homeschool students. It's a very serious debate that continues to have an impact on the public schools in the U.S., and it's become so intertwined into our polarized political scene that it could be troublesome in the future.