About the National Superintendent of the Year Program

Established in 1988 and co-sponsored by ARAMARK Education, this award recognizes outstanding leadership among superintendents. State selection committees choose the superintendents of the year, and a national blue ribbon panel selects four finalists and ultimately the national superintendent. The 2005 National Superintendent of the Year is Monte Moses of the Cherry Creek School District in Greenwood Village, Colorado.

About the American Association of School Administrators

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA), founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders across America and in many other countries. The mission of the AASA is to support and develop effective school system leaders who are dedicated to the highest quality public education for all children.

About ARAMARK Education

ARAMARK Education provides a complete range of food, facility, uniform and other support services to more than 650 K-12 school districts in the U.S. It offers education institutions a family of dining and facility services including: on-site breakfast and lunch meal programs, summer and adult feeding, catering, nutrition education, retail design and operations, maintenance, custodial, grounds, energy management, construction management and building commissioning.

AASA would like to thank ARAMARK Education for its ongoing support of the National Superintendent of the Year Program and its sponsorship of this publication.

Editorial and Design: Schoolhouse Communications and KSA-Plus Communications.
INTRODUCTION

For the first time in the 18-year history of the National Superintendent of the Year Program, the AASA invited 2005 state winners to a leadership forum designed specifically for them. The three-day forum, held in October in Denver, Colorado, offered a candid look inside the world of today’s superintendent.

In this forum, titled Leadership for Change, superintendents openly discussed the challenges they face, how they are tackling those challenges, and what is ahead for public education. They shared insightful and moving stories about efforts to close the achievement gap, engage the public in the work of public schools, and help all children succeed with limited resources.

More than 30 superintendents from rural, urban, and suburban districts – both large and small – attended the forum. While the challenges varied from community to community, one common observation emerged: The superintendents participating in the landmark forum were successful despite the odds.

This report offers readers a rare opportunity to discern how the nation’s best superintendents successfully balance internal and external change to ensure all children achieve at high levels.

AASA wishes to thank the state superintendents of the year who participated in the forum. We hope we have captured your observations with the same vigor and honesty with which you shared them.
Leading as a superintendent in today’s public education arena is arguably one of the toughest jobs around. The hours are long. The challenges are great. The dynamics change from day to day.

Factor in the new realities facing public education such as limited funding, greater demands for accountability, and the erosion of local control and you understand just how tough it can be. These are realities that have significant implications for how superintendents lead.

The 2005 National Superintendent of the Year Monte Moses of the Cherry Creek School District in Greenwood Village, Colorado, identified a dozen new realities confronting public education:

- Revenue and expenditure limitations
- Increasingly diverse and complex students and families
- High public expectations and accountability for student achievement
- Rapid advances in knowledge and technology
- Business and political concerns about public education
- International competition in education
- More legal and law enforcement issues
- Violence, racism, and substance abuse
- Choice and vouchers
- Growing state control of education
- Increases in student enrollment
- Erosion of public confidence and common agreement about public education.
Given these new realities, school boards are having a difficult time recruiting qualified applicants for superintendent positions. This can be attributed in great measure to fewer numbers of qualified people willing to apply for the position. Even those inside the profession acknowledge that the day-to-day challenges can erode a superintendent’s spirit. Many pursued the profession because of their love for children; instead they find themselves in a welter of state and federal regulations, competing political agendas, and high-stakes accountability. As one superintendent put it, “This was our calling, and that has changed. It’s like moving from an overarching mission to a job.”

One retired superintendent acknowledged the pressures can take their toll, even indirectly influencing those just beginning in the profession. “At our statewide meetings, I saw very little joy,” said former Colorado Association of School Executives Executive Director Bob Tschirki, who facilitated the Denver forum. “Yet among the young leaders, there was a sense of optimism. And you know who changed that? Veterans, people like me. I would challenge every one of you to change that if that is true in your respective states.”

**A View from the Trenches**

In small group discussions, superintendents expanded on the new realities.

The lack of adequate resources in an era of high-stakes accountability quickly took center stage. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has placed more pressure than ever on schools and districts to perform. While several participants valued NCLB’s emphasis on closing the
achievement gap and using data to spotlight weaknesses in student performance, many expressed concern that the federal law fell short of providing the dollars needed to ensure long-lasting change.

In North Dakota, public education advocates have pushed back with an adequacy funding lawsuit, according to the state’s superintendent of the year. “This goes against our culture in our state because we work hard to solve our differences. A lawsuit has been filed as a number of school districts in our state feel the present funding formula needs to be overhauled along with a significant infusion of dollars by the state that would provide an adequate and equitable funding system,” said Dean Koppelman who is superintendent of the Valley City, North Dakota, Public School District.

Other superintendents expressed concern about competing for dollars with charter schools and vouchers – as well as with well-known state budget busters like Medicaid and prisons.

Superintendents also expressed frustration with the growing number of political and educational reform agendas foisted on public schools – agendas that they say stray from a district’s strategic plan or are not always research-based. “Everyone wants to put their agenda on us,” said Superintendent Keith Richards of Newark, Ohio. From state legislatures to a patchwork of groups touting various reforms, superintendents are caught in the middle as public education becomes increasingly politicized. The result: Irresolute school system leaders can quickly find themselves off course.
Forum participants said they navigate these challenges by communicating clearly about their district’s mission and objectives, holding themselves accountable for results, and identifying stakeholders who can advocate on their behalf. Strategies mentioned by participants included mobilizing parents and community members to lobby legislators; launching an advertising campaign to raise awareness about adequacy issues; developing a statewide network of coalitions; and communicating timely and relevant information to staff.

Superintendents also agree that they must do a better job of educating staff about the need for school improvement. “Teachers don’t realize what we see coming,” said superintendent Lyn Guy of Union, West Virginia. “Our own people do not see the need for change. It’s as if they are looking out their windows and see the storm coming, but refuse to step out of the homes they believe are cozy and safe. Truth is they are in the direct line of harm’s way.”

“We are all working in silos,” added Herman Gaither, retired superintendent of the Beaufort County School District in Beaufort, South Carolina. “Staff doesn’t see that if we don’t all get it together and work together, then we will disappear.”

By far, the new reality that drew the most passionate views in small group discussions was the leadership role superintendents must exert in light of changing student demographics such as poverty and the increasing number of students who do not speak English.
Several superintendents acknowledged that the practice of sorting and selecting the best students continues in classrooms across the country. “We know that poor children can learn,” said Frances Karanovich, superintendent of the Macomb School District in Macomb, Illinois. “Do kids from low-income families face greater challenges? Sure. But we have the data to show we are closing the gap.”

Superintendent Bill Johnson of Rockville Centre, New York, pointed the finger squarely back at school system leaders, asking the group, “Are we part of the problem of resegregation?”

Today’s parents have more choices and are savvy consumers of public schools. “They shop around and that brings with it a greater sense of urgency for change,” said Mary Kamerzell, superintendent of the Catalina Foothills School District in Tucson, Arizona.

Many superintendents agreed these new realities called for courageous and assertive leadership, but some struggled with how best to provide the leadership necessary to bring about change for all students.

Some successful strategies included using data to debunk stereotypes and misperceptions, recruiting more minority students to Advanced Placement classes, increasing the number of International Baccalaureate programs in high-poverty schools, increasing access to preschool, and stepping up efforts to recruit highly talented teachers to work with the most challenged students.

“Do kids from low-income families face greater challenges? Sure. But we have the data to show we are closing the gap.”

— Frances Karanovich, superintendent, Macomb School District, IL
NEW REALITIES ARE TRANSFORMING THE WAY SUPERINTENDENTS LEAD

The new realities facing today’s superintendent require a transformation in leadership. AASA Executive Director Paul Houston encouraged superintendents to rethink their traditional approach to leadership. (See “Leadership for Change” on page 9.) “We have to move from command and control to tapping the personal power of our teachers, principals, and others with whom we work,” said Houston. “Are you going to be General Patton or the Dalai Lama? Both are effective but in different contexts.” Instead, Houston suggested that school system leaders think of themselves more like an orchestra conductor and encourage the best from all the members of their “orchestra.”

The paradox, noted Houston, is that while superintendents are responsible for results, they are not necessarily in charge. One of a superintendent’s most critical roles is to convene and persuade rather than dictate exclusively from the top. Drawing on his own experience as a superintendent, Houston said, “I had to get a thicker skin. People who didn’t even know me were always saying bad things about me. After a while, I said, ‘Take a number.’ But, I also listened to what they said. It’s really about being humble enough to know that maybe someone else has a better idea.”

Tschirki reinforced Houston’s comments with a quote from playwright George Bernard Shaw: “The person I miss most is the person I used to be.” Tschirki noted that this loss of identity can easily happen in the
superintendency, and if leaders are fortunate, they have someone who will bring it to their attention. “Someone who will say, ‘Are you OK? You are not as open as you used to be.’ And, you know, if you had to take punch after punch, you may not be either. But as leaders, we have to be very careful about that.”

The monumental challenges facing today’s superintendent can quickly wear down a leader. Superintendents were cautioned against losing their vision over the long haul. Houston, who was recently diagnosed with glaucoma, used the disease as a metaphor to underscore his point. “It’s an insidious disease because it sneaks up on you. Liquid pressure builds in the eye starting with your peripheral vision and moves inward until you have tunnel vision. It’s not unlike being a superintendent. The pressure builds. You make a lot of little decisions. Over time, if you are not thoughtful, you will lose your vision.”

Superintendents were also urged to play a greater advocacy role in their states. Houston asked superintendents to “get more gutsy” about people determined to erode public education and called upon school system leaders to stand up to them. “As superintendents of the year, you are now state leaders,” he said.

“Over time, if you are not thoughtful, you will lose your vision.”
— Paul Houston, executive director, AASA
Leadership for Change

In his opening remarks, AASA Executive Director Paul Houston urged superintendents to adopt transforming leadership styles to achieve results, such as:

- Moving from command and control to empowerment
- Understanding that as a leader, you are responsible but not in charge
- Convening and persuading
- Listening more than talking
- Having the heart to connect to people
- Being humble enough to know that someone else may have a better idea
- Employing cautious risk-taking
- Viewing failure as a positive experience
- Standing up to those out to destroy public education
- And most importantly, serving as a strong and unrelenting advocate for children.

Mixed Messages

These new realities can make it challenging for superintendents to determine what the public really wants from its schools. For example, Guy recently asked for public input on her district’s new strategic plan. What Guy heard took her by surprise: “I gave them hard data on student achievement and soft data on alcohol abuse, early sexual activity and drug use. Early sex, alcohol and drug use were the priority issues our community wanted us to focus on. I said to myself, ‘I’m in the wrong business.’ Our citizens want us to work on social issues.”

The community’s emphasis on social issues rather than student achievement in today’s high-stakes accountability environment sent a mixed message. Guy is not alone. Her experience resonated with other superintendents, including Moses. While parents in Moses’ district valued high test scores, they consistently rated thinking skills higher than competency in content areas. “Parents get it that kids are going to have to be self-disciplined to be college-ready,” he said.

For Richards, a conversation with business leaders yielded similar findings. They valued soft skill development such as placing a high value on success, a strong work ethic, company loyalty, and punctuality. Like the parents in the Cherry Creek School District, business leaders in Newark, Ohio, said it’s the skill of learning that’s most important to them. “When we asked them about the importance of teaching the kids the skills, business leaders said, ‘We’re going to teach them that anyway.’”
Superintendents talked at length about the mixed messages they receive from parents, business leaders, and community members. While many place a high value on student achievement, other areas such as drug and pregnancy prevention or work skills dominate discussions about what individuals expect from public schools – often leaving superintendents scratching their collective heads about what their public truly expects from its schools. While everyone embraced their mission to increase student achievement and hold themselves accountable for results, finding a balance between the push for high test scores and the desire to graduate a well-rounded student was seemingly elusive.

Seven Steps to Transform Public Education: The Role of the Superintendent

Step 1: Get a better definition of reality.

Step 2: Reinvigorate the vision of public education to propel the American dream.

Step 3: Elevate awareness of the magnitude of the challenge, and garner the necessary resources.

Step 4: Put in place more enlightened management and labor practices.

Step 5: Think 16-PreK with the intent of preparing every student for college.

Step 6: Commit to reform as a long-term process, not a political event.

Step 7: Lead more wisely and courageously.

Source: Monte Moses, 2005 National Superintendent of the Year
For many superintendents, data has become a powerful tool in identifying gaps in learning, examining instructional practice, raising awareness in the community, and challenging misperceptions.

Given the monumental challenges facing superintendents, what strategies have they employed to meet these challenges head-on? In small group discussions, state superintendents of the year shared best practices for effective leadership.

**Using Data to Improve Student Achievement**

For many superintendents, data has become a powerful tool in identifying gaps in learning, examining instructional practice, raising awareness in the community, and challenging misperceptions.

Many superintendents participating in the forum say they use data regularly in their work, and they do not shy away from putting controversial data before the community or their staff. “We quit acting like we didn’t have problems in Cherry Creek,” Moses said of his high-achieving, conservative school district. “For too long, we let the aggregation of data give us a free pass.”

In Macomb, Illinois, disaggregating the data has also paid off. Last year, the district made impressive gains with its low-performing students. “Our teachers will tell you it’s because we are deliberate about reviewing and responding to data,” said Karanovich. It has also had an impact on school leaders. “I told one of my principals that ‘if you are a white student attending his school, great. But if you are a special
needs student, God help you. Look at the disaggregated data,' I told him. 'Is this the kind of legacy you want to leave in your last year?’ This principal now uses data regularly and is turning things around.”

Kamerzell in Tucson, Arizona, has created data teams in each school made up of clusters of teachers by grade level at the elementary and middle school levels and by content area at the high school level. Together, the teams review data student by student and collaborate on improvement plans.

**Instituting a Laser-like Focus**

Superintendents are often barraged with competing agendas, demands, and ideas for new reform strategies from parents, the public, school boards, and state and federal officials. The key, say successful school system leaders, is to keep the focus on the district’s mission and strategic plan.

Many acknowledge in today’s high-stakes environment, it is easy to get off task, but maintaining a laser-like focus can make all the difference. A thoughtful, effective strategic planning process results in a powerful refocusing on what matters most. It also ensures that everyone – teachers, principals, school board members, and administrators – are on the same page.

“For example, we decided that we weren’t going to spend any more money on professional development unless it advanced our new strategic plan’s goals,” said Richard Tranter, superintendent of the Murray City School District in Murray, Utah.

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**Top 10 Leadership Tips from 2005 State Superintendents of the Year:**

- Use data to identify gaps in achievement, show results, and debunk misperceptions.
- Employ a laser-like focus on the district’s strategic plan and do not get sidetracked.
- Understand that different situations will call for different leadership styles.
- Engage the public in the work of public schools.
- Improve the amount and frequency of communication with staff, parents, and the community.
- Surround yourself with smart, competent people and let them do their jobs.
- Do not be afraid of not always knowing the answer to every question.
- Know when to step back and when to engage.
- Accept that your staff may lead differently.
- Take on the challenges that call for courage.
Public Engagement

Many superintendents point to the value of engaging the public in the work of public schools. The key, they say is knowing when and how to do it. Public engagement efforts focused on data sharing, understanding what data mattered most to the public, strategic planning, and other areas related to school improvement. Some urged district leaders to be thoughtful and strategic about what it is they want to know. For example, instead of opening up a district’s entire strategic plan for review, the public may be asked to share input on certain aspects of the plan.

Strategic Communications

Too often, superintendents run the risk of letting someone else set the agenda for them. Successful superintendents communicate timely and relevant information to both internal and external audiences with great frequency. Honing those communication skills and identifying the effective strategies can take time, but the results can mean a staff and public who understand and support the mission of the district. “Think about your district’s image and manage it well,” advised Moses. “Make decisions about how you want to package the district.”

Too often, said participants, superintendents make the mistake of overlooking internal communications. “Internal communications are very important,” said Larry Hill, a superintendent from Buffalo Center, Iowa. “For example, meeting with my support staff and developing common language around our work were as powerful as meeting with the faculty and the community.”
Western States Benchmarking Consortium: Seven School Districts Search for More Meaningful Accountability

In the mid-1990s, seven high-performing school districts joined forces to determine what benchmarks were critical to improve achievement for all students. “It’s a powerful tool because our notion of excellence is much more robust than test scores only,” said Superintendent Don Phillips of Poway, California. “We examine what it means to provide a well-rounded, solid education.”

Working in close partnership with AASA, consortium members meet three times a year to discuss best practices, strategies for improvement, and issues such as closing the achievement gap — and they are seeing results. “We’re attacking the achievement gap campus by campus,” said Superintendent Doug Otto of Plano, Texas. “The dirty little secret is that a lot of kids are not doing well. We shared that with our community and assured them that we are not taking the focus off our highest-performing students. We were able to create a sense of urgency and excitement.”

This year, the consortium is focusing on getting the right data to teachers, changing the “sort and select” mindset still prevalent in the classroom, and ensuring that all students are college-ready.

Although membership in the consortium is closed, the group’s work offers important insights for superintendents who may wish to adopt the model in collaboration with other peers. “Being a superintendent is a lonely job, and you don’t have a lot of people to talk to,” said Phillips. “The collegiality fostered by the consortium is a real value-add.”

The depth of the consortium’s conversations has led to breakthroughs that they may not have reached as quickly on their own. “My district is better for it,” said Otto. “Now my teachers may not like the ambitious agenda I bring home from one of our consortium meetings, but I’m excited and invigorated to have the same conversations with them.”

To learn more about the Western States Benchmarking Consortium or to view benchmarks, visit www.wsbenchmark.org.
Hill also holds “Coffee on the Superintendent” meetings several times a year in a local coffee shop in his rural community. It is an opportunity for him to share the district’s progress toward its goals, answer questions, address rumors, and listen to what is on the minds of residents. “They don’t want to talk football; they want to know if they are getting their money’s worth.” Hill credits the community coffee klatches – now in their 8th year – as one of the reasons the district recently passed a bond issue with 80 percent of the vote. “The most telling comment was when a person stood up and said, ‘Someone built the school I went to when I was a boy. Now, I owe it to help build a school for our kids.’”

No one strategy is likely to work on its own, stressed participants. They urged other superintendents to assess needs and then determine which strategy works best for them.

“They don’t want to talk football; they want to know if they are getting their money’s worth.”
— Larry Hill, superintendent, Buffalo Center, IA
Good Reads

Interested in knowing what the country’s top superintendents are reading? Here’s a look at the books recommended by AASA’s 2005 state superintendents of the year:

- *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, by Malcolm Gladwell
- *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, by Jared Diamond
- *The Contrarian’s Guide to Leadership*, by Steven B. Sample
- *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, by Daniel Goleman
- *The Four Agreements: A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom (A Toltec Wisdom Book)*, by Don Miguel Ruiz
- *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...And Others Don’t*, by Jim Collins
- *How the Brain Learns*, by David A. Sousa
- *The Shame of a Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, by Jonathan Kozol
- *Thinking for a Change: 11 Ways Highly Successful People Approach Life and Work*, by John C. Maxwell
- *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, by Malcolm Gladwell
- *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, by Thomas L. Friedman
Throughout the forum, participants urged AASA to create a network of peers to mentor emerging leaders as well as share best practices and lessons learned. “It gets very lonely at times,” said Johnson. “It’s important that we learn from each other what works and what doesn’t so we can shorten the time to implement strategies more effectively.”

Attendees also encouraged AASA to help better mobilize the collective voices of superintendents and develop common language. Superintendents pointed to pivotal issues such as vouchers and choice, court cases on funding, and others that will play a major role in shaping the future of the nation’s public schools. “We need a national strategy and agenda,” urged Gaither. “We have 50 different strategies out there, and we are fighting tanks with rocks.”

For several years, AASA has focused more of its work on making a strong stand for public education and public school leaders. Still, AASA leaders acknowledged more must be done. “We are honing in on many of the issues you are talking about,” Houston said. “You’re right – how can we better galvanize the voice of our profession? We’ve got shock troops out there in every state. How do we get them to push back?”

The 2005 State Superintendents of the Year agreed that an effective way of galvanizing their voices is through experiences such as the forum. For that reason, AASA and ARAMARK Education have agreed to invite the 2006 State Superintendents of the Year to a similar forum in October 2006.
### 2005 State Superintendents of the Year

The following superintendents were selected as the 2005 state superintendents of the year:

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<td>James T. Jenkins</td>
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<td>School District of Kettle Moraine, Wales</td>
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<td>Washakie County School District 1, Worland</td>
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<td>Paul Michael Poore</td>
<td>Harare International School, Harare</td>
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