

Jack Jennings spent almost 30 years on Capitol Hill as subcommittee staff director and then general counsel for the House Committee on Education and Labor. He founded the Washington, D.C.-based Center on Education Policy, a respected nonpartisan think tank that analyzes the impact of federal legislation on K-12 schools.

Jennings' new book, *Presidents, Congress, and the Public Schools: The Politics of Education Reform*, was released this spring to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. He spoke with freelance writer Glenn Cook as part of AASA's coverage of its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

**You've worked with AASA for almost four decades. What is your view of the organization and its impact on K-12 schools.**

"I've always considered AASA to be one of the best organizations in terms of being able to represent its' members points of view. They have always been effective in influencing Democrats and Republicans on policy and are known as an organization that would talk to both parties. Some education organizations tend to be more partisan and not as widespread, so that's a valuable commodity.

"Over the last 15 years or so, Bruce Hunter and his successors could go into the Republican and Democratic offices when the unions would have trouble getting in the door. AASA was talking to everybody, and while you knew they would always fight for flexibility at the local level, you also knew the organization supported national purposes, such as educating the disadvantaged, increasing funding for Title I and IDEA and other federal laws. They try to keep things simple while supporting the federal role in education. They believe federal programs should be funded properly and fit in and complement the way education is being offered at the local level."

**In your book, you write that AASA and the National School Boards Association were instrumental in crafting the landmark Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which Congress passed in 1975. At the same time, you have said IDEA is one of their greatest disappointments. Please explain why this is the case.**

"They were very concerned that it was too bureaucratic and too much paperwork, and they couldn't convince the advocates for the disabled to simplify the process as much as far as they wanted. That's why you get so many complaints at the local level about IDEA because it became more complicated than AASA, the school boards and other organizations thought it should be. Add in the lack of money and you get double trouble.

"And that's the disappointment, that they were never able to convince Congress to fully fund the bill that was written. You had Democratic and Republican members in

Congress who were bragging about crafting this landmark legislation, which it was, and then not paying for what they had promised.”

**The other, most significant stand on federal legislation that AASA has taken is in its opposition to the No Child Left Behind Act. Do you think the organization was correct in that opposition?**

“Yes. They were right early on about NCLB. They saw that it was a closed-door process that did not take the concerns of teachers and administrators into account, especially where it related to test-based accountability. They argued long and hard about it, and for a long time they were the only ones that did. They weren’t listened to, and now the chickens are coming home to roost.”

**The political polarization we see today, especially in Congress, is making it difficult for any education organization to feel like they are being heard. How does that affect groups like AASA?**

“AASA has had decades where they were listened to, because you knew that they were accurately looking at education at the local level. And I think that’s still the case. One key, however, is keeping their membership base energized and working from the bottom up to influence individual members of Congress. Being able to provide their members the necessary information and tools is critical in helping them to do that.

“The interesting thing is that I don’t identify AASA as only wanting local control. If you do that now, you marginalize yourself with a significant number of members of Congress and the Department of Education. AASA has always supported IDEA and the federal programs that bring more attention to the needs of disadvantaged children. They’ve pushed for math and science improvement. What they’ve argued for is to make things as simple as possible and fund the programs that the federal government has said they’re going to fund. And that battle is long from being over.”