

2012

State Superintendent
of the Year Forum

Leadership for Change

THE SHIFTING EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

Advocating
for Student
Success



American Association of School Administrators



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The American Association of School Administrators (AASA), founded in 1865, is the professional organization for more than 13,000 educational leaders in the United States and throughout the world. The mission of AASA is to advocate for the highest quality public education for all students, and to develop and support school system leaders. For more information, visit www.aasa.org. Follow AASA on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AASAHQ. Become a fan of the AASA Facebook page at www.facebook.com/AASApag.



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Introduction

The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) invited 2012 state superintendents of the year to meet in Washington, D.C., in December 2012 for two days of dialogue about the shifting educational landscape and the critical advocacy role of district leaders. Rich, and often times frank, conversations uncovered the challenges and opportunities of new Common Core State Standards, educator evaluations, federal policy and the role leadership plays as sweeping efforts to prepare tomorrow's graduates for college and the global workforce take hold in public schools across the nation.

Forum participants had candid conversations about how these initiatives are unfolding in an environment facing significant budget challenges and an increasingly vocal chorus of public school critics. This publication highlights major themes from the forum, strategies for success and a look at what's on the horizon for our country's public schools.

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT Common Core State Standards

Across the country, superintendents are having in-depth conversations with teachers, principals, support staff and their communities about what the new Common Core State Standards mean for students. So far, 46 states have adopted the new standards. While implementation is further along in some states than in others, many educators are wrestling with common issues — such as professional development, instruction, curriculum alignment, assessments and communications — in a relatively short time frame and with limited funds.

What are the Common Core State Standards?

Driven by a state-led effort to give students the skills and knowledge they need to succeed, the Common Core standards were benchmarked against the best standards in the United States and in high-achieving countries. The standards place an even greater emphasis on literacy, critical thinking skills and depth of learning.

While states can choose whether to adopt the Common Core standards, those that opt in will have the same math and English/language arts standards in grades K-12. Advocates say working from the same standards will make it easier for those states to pool information and resources to develop tests that better evaluate student progress.

In the past, each state had its own process for developing standards. As a result, what students were expected to know varied from state to state, making it harder to evaluate and compare academic progress consistently across the country.

Who is backing Common Core State Standards?

The Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association Center are spearheading the initiative and are joined by AASA; Achieve; and other prominent organizations representing K-12 education, higher education, parents, the business community and states.

Achieve, founded in 1996 by the nation's governors and business leaders, is a bipartisan, nonprofit organization focused on standards, assessments and accountability. Achieve President Michael Cohen, who helped to develop the new Common Core standards, told superintendents of the year that the standards require educators to teach fewer topics in a much more focused, coherent and clear way.

“We now have a math curriculum that is a mile wide and an inch deep — that changes under the Common Core,” said Cohen. For example, students will solve even more complex, real-world math problems; all students will learn linear algebra in eighth grade; and the math standards will promote rigor through mathematical practices that foster reasoning and application across disciplines.

“I do support Common Core standards because of the diversity of the students that I serve. If we don’t educate more of our kids at a much higher level, including special needs and those who have just come to our country, we are in trouble economically.”

— *Ohio Superintendent of the Year Gene Harris*

Common Core standards also require significant shifts in reading and writing. The expectations of *all* students are higher than in the past. Students will draw evidence from what they have read and make a logical, coherent argument. There is a greater balance between literature and informational texts with more emphasis on argument, informative and explanatory writing, and research. Students will read more challenging material that will better prepare them for college and the workforce.

Superintendents share their hopes for the Common Core

A panel of superintendents shared different perspectives about the Common Core standards, with many viewing greater consistency in learning across states as a positive step forward.

Ohio Superintendent of the Year Gene Harris leads Columbus City Schools, the largest school district in the state with 52,000 students who speak 91 different languages. “I do support Common Core standards because of the diversity of the students that I serve. If we don’t educate more of our kids at a much higher level, including special needs and those who have just come to our country, we are in trouble economically.”

Washington Superintendent of the Year Patti Banks backs Common Core standards because they bring more rigor, consistency and stability. “Washington state could be the poster child for standards that shift and change too frequently,” she said. “The hope for higher level, more consistent standards is strong in our state.” Banks also emphasized

Why do we need Common Core standards?

- Consistent standards across the states.
- Global, not neighborhood, competition.
- College and career readiness.

Why are Common Core standards important?

- Prepare students with the knowledge and skills to succeed in college and in a career.
- Ensure consistent expectations regardless of a student’s ZIP code.
- Provide educators, parents and students with clear, focused guideposts.
- Offer economies of scale and sharing of best practices.

SOURCE: ACHIEVE

her view that implementation of the Common Core standards is a social justice issue, to ensure that *all* students have the opportunity to learn at high levels.

But not all states are adopting Common Core standards. So far, four states have refused to sign on, including Texas.

“Our superintendents would say it’s not the role of the federal government to be involved in standards and assessments,” said Texas Superintendent of the Year Jeff Turner. “We don’t really believe that the testing and the standards are the issues to solve our problems in education. The real answer is the pedagogy. We can tell you right now which schools will be successful and which schools will struggle.”

Hard work ahead

As states adopt the Common Core standards, principals, teachers and superintendents are developing lesson plans; tailoring instruction; and aligning curriculum, professional development and staff evaluations. States also are aligning the new standards, assessments and educator evaluation systems as they further refine how they hold school districts accountable for results.

Cohen said 30-plus states have made changes in their accountability indicators. “Many of them are trying to figure out what are the indicators of college and career readiness, and how does that relate to the Common Core standards.”

Instructional improvement is another big challenge for states, said Cohen, whose organization helps states implement the new Common Core standards. “For example, many districts have adopted instructional programs that teachers use. How do those programs relate to the demands of the Common Core standards?”

For one superintendent, it is simply a matter of building upon what is already in place.

“While the Common Core standards are different, there’s still a whole lot of stuff that’s the same,” said Arizona Superintendent of the Year Calvin Baker. “If you have a good instructional system, you’ve got a good foundation. We’re just taking the systems we have and making adjustments in the content of the standards we are teaching and [in] staff development. We haven’t had to take any hard left turns.”

For others, there is nothing simple about implementing Common Core standards. The conversation for many attending the 2012 State Superintendent of the Year Forum focused squarely on how best to support teachers so they are successful with students.

“The majority of our teachers don’t know how to teach to the level of rigor that is expected of the Common Core,” said

“We don’t really believe that the testing and the standards are the issues to solve our problems in education. The real answer is the pedagogy.”

— Texas Superintendent of the Year Jeff Turner

“The content knowledge of our teachers to teach the Common Core requires more of our teachers at a time when our budgets have been cut. We don’t have the money to buy more of their time.”

— Washington Superintendent of the Year Patti Banks

Connecticut Superintendent of the Year Diane Ullman. “There’s little conversation about how we are going to develop our workforce.”

Putting supports in place for teachers

Superintendents talked about how best to put supports in place for teachers to help them shift their teaching to meet the expectations of the Common Core standards. These supports include increased, ongoing professional development; gap analyses between the new and old standards; sample units and lesson plans; adjustments in teaching; and professional learning communities.

“The single biggest issue is building capacity of our teachers to teach these standards in a way that is different than all the other standards that have been visited on us,” Washington Superintendent of the Year Patti Banks said. “The content knowledge of our teachers to teach Common Core requires more of our teachers at a time when our budgets have been cut. We don’t have the money to buy more of their time.”

Aligning new educator evaluation systems to the Common Core

The new standards also present major implications for how states design educator evaluation systems that align with the Common Core. “We’re struggling with growth models and trying to figure out what they look like,” said Ohio Superintendent Gene Harris. “Our teachers may find themselves rated in a way they have not been before with new standards and assessments aligned to the Common Core. We want to make sure our teachers don’t run out the door screaming.”

In districts with pay-for-performance models, alignment with Common Core may result in the decline of teacher ratings. “We just went through a round of pay for performance with bonuses ranging from no bonus up to \$3,000,” said Idaho Superintendent of the Year Mary Vagner. “It was devastating and fractured our school staff. Now, it could result in some of our schools’ ratings dropping from as high as five stars to as low as one star.”

Many states and districts are implementing the new Common Core standards at the same time they are putting in place new teacher evaluation systems, noted AASA Executive Director Dan Domenech. “The problem is that the test results on which the teachers are being evaluated are not yet aligned with the Common Core standards,” said Domenech. “When these tests are administered in 2014, there is going to be this

huge dysfunction between performance on these tests and the public’s reaction: ‘We have given you all this money and our kids are doing worse today than ever.’” (See *Communications challenges* on page 8.)

Assessments for the new standards

Among the most common concerns expressed by superintendents are the assessments that will measure whether students are meeting the new standards. Achieve’s Cohen noted that the

“The use of the assessments will either elevate public education across America or destroy it.”

— Colorado Superintendent of the Year Charlotte Ciancio

Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) is focused on creating high-quality, computer-based assessments that build a pathway to college and career readiness for all students and support educators in the classroom. Another assessment aligned to the new standards is Smart Balance.

Several states, including Colorado, have committed to administering the PARCC assessments in 2014-2015. Colorado Superintendent of the Year Charlotte Ciancio said it is relatively easy to agree with the goals of the Common Core, but the assessments are key.

“The use of the assessments will either elevate public education across America or destroy it,” she said. “If we use the assessments to diagnose and understand problems, develop interventions and then invest in solutions, we can meet the goals of the Common Core. If we continue to use assessments to simply sort and label schools, districts and states with the most significant challenges, we risk destroying the promise of public education and further isolating our most vulnerable children.”

Cohen stressed that PARCC is making “a deliberate effort” to ensure the standards are driving the assessments rather than the assessments driving classroom instruction. “It may not seem like a dramatic innovation until you think about how this plays out,” he said. “It’s driving what the test looks like rather than the other way around.”

The PARCC test is expected to be far more rigorous than even some of the best state assessments. It will provide results quickly as well as feedback for teachers throughout the school year, according to Cohen.

“The hardest part is going to be raising the bar with the new assessments,” said North Carolina Superintendent of the Year Diane Frost. “I think this is not just one level up. The new assessments will be three to four levels up from where the current assessments are.”

Another superintendent pointed out that for the state’s eighth-graders, the Common Core expectations are a year or two ahead of what the students have been exposed to in the classroom.

“The plane is in the air, and we are building it and flying it at the same time,” Maryland Superintendent of the Year Karen Salmon said. “We need to make sure that kids are not harmed at the speed at which we are reforming ourselves.”

Bruce Hunter, AASA’s associate executive director of advocacy, policy and communications, asked Cohen if there has been any conversation about a moratorium on rating schools on student performance while districts get their new systems up and running.

“We’re designing assessments grade by grade and we want to do that faithfully,” Cohen said. “They presume that the students have mastered the standards at the previous grade as we implement the next grade, but the challenge is when do the consequences weigh

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— Maryland Superintendent of the Year Karen Salmon

The PARCC goals

- Create high-quality assessments.
- Build a pathway to college and career readiness for *all* students.
- Support educators in the classroom.
- Develop 21st century, technology-based assessments.
- Advance accountability at all levels.
- Build an assessment that is sustainable and affordable.

SOURCE: ACHIEVE

“We saw a 30 percent drop in English language proficiency and a 40 percent drop in math. But public backlash did not happen in the way that we feared. We let folks know in advance what the scores are going to measure and that these are new tests and new standards.”

— *Kentucky Superintendent of the Year Lu Settles Young*

in? Most three-year growth models are statistically designed in a way that if everyone starts low, there’s room to grow over time. So as long as the focus is on growth rather than absolute performance, there’s a built-in safety net.”

Communications challenges

Superintendents play a key role in helping parents, staff and the community understand what the new standards and assessments mean for students. Early, ongoing communication is key.

“The standards are more demanding,” Cohen said. “The tests are more demanding. The test scores are expected to drop. How do we explain that schools have not gotten worse? We have to help folks understand what’s going on.”

Kentucky was one of the first states to roll out Common Core standards and assessments. State and school district leaders proactively communicated about Common Core standards; what they meant for students; and what parents and the community should expect prior to the release of the new test scores.

“We saw a 30 percent drop in English language proficiency and a 40 percent drop in math,” said Kentucky Superintendent of the Year Lu Settles Young. “But public backlash did not happen in the way that we feared. We let folks know in advance what the scores are going to measure and that these are new tests and new standards.”

Several superintendents agreed that proactive, on-going communications about the new standards made a difference. “There was no outcry,” said Wisconsin Superintendent of the Year Kristine Gilmore. “Most people said, ‘I know my school and I’m OK with my school.’ People cared more about their own kid and their kid’s school.”

IMPROVING Teacher and Principal Evaluations

Across the country, states are implementing new ways of evaluating teachers and principals. These efforts are designed to improve student achievement and ensure that every student is on track to graduate college and be workforce ready.

Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education Deborah Delisle is leading the work at the national level. Delisle, who has worked in public education for 38 years as an educator, superintendent and state education commissioner, described the current system of educator evaluations as “a roll of the dice.”

New efforts to improve educator evaluations must move from “a state of confusion” to “deliberateness,” according to Delisle. For example, educator evaluations are shifting from a process focused on sorting, ranking and merit pay to one of enhanced instructional practices that result in improved student performance, measurable and observable actions, and goal setting connected to data. “We must find ways to support people in their work,” she said. “This is not about ‘gotcha.’” The U.S. Department of Education is requiring states to involve principals and teachers in the development of new evaluation systems.

A promising trend is that more states and school districts are exploring the role of teachers in leadership positions such as mentor and master teachers. “You don’t have to leave the classroom to be a leader,” Delisle said. “People make the assumption that really great teachers make great principals, and that is not necessarily true.”

Delisle also cautioned that there is no one perfect educator evaluation system: “A lot of states will call looking for the perfect evaluation model and think, ‘We’ll just copy it.’ But you can’t. It’s different from district to district. It’s also a complex process that continues to evolve.”

Elements of evaluation and support systems

State departments of education and school districts must commit to develop, adopt, pilot and implement — with the involvement of teachers and principals — teacher and principal evaluation and support systems that will:

- Be used for continual improvement of instruction.
- Meaningfully differentiate performance using at least three performance levels.
- Use multiple, valid measures in determining performance levels.
- Evaluate teachers and principals on a regular basis.
- Provide clear, timely and useful feedback, including feedback that identifies needs and guides professional development.
- Be used to inform personnel decisions.

SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Most states are in a “pilot phase,” Delisle said. “They are thinking about what evaluation systems should look like and how teachers should be measured.” States are using multiple sources for evaluations such as test scores, value-added measures, classroom observations, student and parent surveys, peer evaluation, professionalism, contribution to profession, contribution to community, and attendance/late arrivals.

“We work through teacher effectiveness with our principals and assistant principals to the point where they become very accurate about identifying evidence of effectiveness. We are then able to help our principals pare down the amount of time it takes because they know exactly what to look for.”

— *Delaware Superintendent of the Year Susan Smith Bunting*

Delisle also supported taking the time to put in place effective, sustainable educator evaluation systems. “I want to make sure that we are getting quality from states and not just compliance,” she said. “It takes time to get this right. For example, some states have moved to evaluating teachers every year and that’s a really heavy lift, especially if you want to get it right.”

Superintendents talk about evaluations and accountability

During Delisle’s presentation, superintendents of the year held small group conversations about how new evaluation systems held teachers and principals in their districts accountable for increased student achievement.

For many, setting clear, understandable goals was key. “Our principals were very clear with their staff about what they were looking for, and they focused on the most important issues,” said New Hampshire Superintendent of the Year Elaine Cutler.

Others, including Rhode Island Superintendent of the Year Donna Ottaviano, spoke to the issue of capacity among school and district leaders to conduct effective, meaningful evaluations given budget constraints and time: “It takes 800 hours in one school year to conduct evaluations in one of our high schools where there are more than 100 teachers for one principal and two assistant principals. This is a high school with 1,200 students.”

Essential attributes of effective educator evaluations

- Clear and rigorous expectations.
- Differentiated system.
- Based on and supported by reliable data.
- Excellence not defined as minimally acceptable performance.
- Consideration of multiple measures.
- Specificity to difference between and among ratings.
- Internal and external measures.
- Clear, rigorous and aligned accountability system for instructional leaders.
- Inherent accountability for quality of feedback.
- Never “done”: Responds to changing needs of district, schools, staff, students and best practices.

SOURCE: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Delaware Superintendent of the Year Susan Smith Bunting said her district has addressed the time and capacity issues by creating a series of after-school, early-evening professional development activities. “We work through teacher effectiveness with our principals and assistant principals to the point where they become very accurate about identifying evidence of effectiveness,” she said. “We are then able to help our principals pare down the amount of time it takes because they know exactly what to look for.”

In Illinois, Superintendent of the Year Peter Flynn takes a team approach. “One of the things we have talked about was inter-rated reliability. We take a vertical team of people from central office and school leadership and talk about it. We also use video for training. We think professional learning communities will help us continue to grow and overcome the biggest obstacle, which is time.”

For some, it is about reassuring staff that the new evaluation systems aren’t punitive, but aimed at building better supports for teachers. “We’re trying to get to a point where walk-throughs aren’t threatening,” said Nebraska Superintendent of the Year Bill Mowinkel. “Teachers wanted principals in the classroom, and now that they are there, it makes them a little nervous.”

Wisconsin Superintendent Kristine Gilmore said the emphasis on improved educator evaluation systems holds promise: “In our district, we’re excited because this fits the model we have been using and we can take it to a new level. We’re really about teaching and kids learning. I’d rather put our money there instead of another program.”

“This movement has caused us to get clear about what good teaching looks like, and this will be the lasting impact of educator effectiveness and evaluations.”

— Kentucky Superintendent of the Year Lu Settles Young

Advice from Deborah Delisle, assistant secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, U.S. Department of Education

- *Think about the legacy you will leave behind.* Will people say we are better off now than when the superintendent first arrived in our school district?
- *Consider the role of central office staff.* What is the right role for staff members, and how do we hold them accountable? In an era of diminishing resources, this is a big issue.
- *Work smart.* What comes off the table to allow the time to focus on what matters most? Let’s stop wasting people’s time and be purposeful.
- *See schools up close.* We can tell within five minutes if this is a school that we would want our own children to attend. If it’s not, that’s a problem!
- *Be clear about your non-negotiables.* If I were to go into your school district and ask your staff what your non-negotiables are, could they tell me? Would they know? It’s all about the culture you are creating.

Kentucky Superintendent Lu Settles Young has high hopes for the new evaluation system. “This movement has caused us to get clear about what good teaching looks like, and this will be the lasting impact of educator effectiveness and evaluations,” she said.

While much of the emphasis focused on teacher evaluations, other superintendents, such as Iowa Superintendent of the Year Kathleen Mulholland, addressed related efforts to evaluate support staff and central office staff. “We started this work about six years ago,” she said. “Our support staff in schools also get evaluations and they love it.”

Delisle also encouraged superintendents to look more closely at the role of central office staff in supporting student achievement as part of their evaluation efforts. “What is the right role for them?” she asked. “I don’t know that we have ever fully tackled that. What’s happening in the central office and how do we hold them accountable, too? In an era of diminishing resources, that’s a big issue.”

ADVOCATING for Public Education

One of the most critical roles for superintendents is advocating for a high-quality education for all students and managing the dollars it takes to provide excellent instruction and learning to drive student performance. Superintendents of the year engaged in a lively, pointed exchange about education issues with Brad Thomas, senior education policy advisor to Rep. John Kline of Minnesota. Rep. Kline chairs the U.S. House Education and the Workforce Committee. Thomas plays a pivotal role crafting education legislation. The following is an abbreviated version of Thomas' conversation with superintendents of the year.

Brad Thomas: Congratulations! You are the heroes and the ones we should be learning from. We're now working on getting new members of Congress up to speed on the history of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). The reauthorization process stalled this year. I can't say much about what reauthorization will look like moving forward into a new Congress until we can hear from our new members. We're rethinking what the federal role should be moving forward. We want to set broad parameters around what accountability and teacher quality should look like but we're leaving those day-to-day decisions to school districts and states. We believe the federal government should have a limited role in public education.

Larry DiChiara, Alabama Superintendent of the Year: We have to talk about what we are doing better in education. Kids are performing at higher levels. We're reducing the dropout rate. But you wouldn't think so because of public perception. When policy is passed up here and you call them failing schools, it erodes the public perception and they clamor for charter schools and vouchers. I would ask as you are writing policy and talking with people to think in the back of your mind, "Will the end effect further erode the public's confidence in our public schools?"

Thomas: I think it's a delicate balance. A lot of the improvements you are talking about are coming from public pressure. The public wants better schools, better achievement for their kids. I think public pressure is a healthy thing. The problem is when the federal government imposes a standard that just doesn't work — that's absolutely clear.

DiChiara: You talk about bringing new members up to snuff. It's the same with the public. We all want improvements. If that clamoring for change is based on faulty information and accountability systems, that's where the danger lies.

Lu Settles Young, Kentucky Superintendent of the Year: What happens to those of us who have waivers as you work on reauthorization? How do we bridge from waiver purgatory to the new reauthorization approach? Can reauthorization address this on the front end?

Thomas: I think there are some ways we can address it on the front end. There could be some transition headaches depending on how we go about it.

Young: The reality for states is that we are charting a pretty aggressive approach, too.

Jeff Turner, Texas Superintendent of the Year: The pressure is not coming from parents. They think their public schools are doing just fine. You talk about limited federal control, but we have more federal control now than ever. If you are for limited federal control, you are going in the wrong direction.

Thomas: I believe that the right approach is a limited federal role. Reauthorization should reduce federal control to an appropriate level. But there are a lot of people who disagree with that.

Lorraine Lange, Virginia Superintendent of the Year: Parents are tired of testing. It's not parents who are complaining. It's coming from Washington. Who are the people who want these reforms? I don't believe it's the parents either.

Thomas: I think it depends on which parents you talk to. I have talked to plenty of parents who want reform. It depends on where you sit. State departments love to blame the feds — and, in some cases, justifiably so. But in other cases, not justifiably so. I would separate a clamoring for reform from what are the appropriate federal mandates around what kinds of reforms are necessary. I don't think the federal government should tell states and districts how to judge the quality of their schools and what an accountability system should look like. But I do think student performance data should be public and transparent.

Jeanne Collins, Vermont Superintendent of the Year: The general public is receiving a lot of negative information from D.C. and the media. I like the idea of crafting policy in a way that builds public confidence in our public schools. You mentioned that there's a lot of tension between formula grants versus Race to the Top. But it's not an either/or; it's a both/and. I'm looking at cutting \$3.5 million in my district — that's huge for me in Vermont. I'm undoing every piece of innovation that I have put in place because I have to cost-shift over from federal grants to local dollars because the formula grants are not being funded.

Thomas: There are not going to be any large increases to education from the federal government. That's why the federal government needs to focus on a few things and do those well rather than trying to do everything. That has always been the Chairman's argument with respect to IDEA [the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act] versus things like Race to the Top. With limited federal dollars available, we should put them where they make the most sense.

Collins: I'm arguing *for* formula.

Thomas: And I'm saying why don't we pick the things that we can fund really well, and do those. For example, if the federal government funded IDEA, think of all the state and local money that would free up for things such as wraparound programs to deal with kids' social and emotional needs, technology, etc. It's just a different way of thinking about it.

Patti Banks, Washington Superintendent of the Year: Can we push back more on the word "innovation"? It has become a buzzword, at both the national and states level. Richard Elmore [a leader in education reform] says public schools have always chased after the latest trend, but they haven't paid rigorous attention to actual improvement of outcomes for students. In our state, districts are recognized for "innovation" while their actual student achievement is persistently low. Districts really need to focus on the core work. Innovation is not an end; maybe it's a means. We hear a lot of talk about "we have to be free to take risks." Well, the risks are being borne by the students. Instead, I'd like us to talk more about research-based practice that works.

Thomas: You can innovate using research-based practices. Innovation isn't the problem — it's wise innovation that we need. Sometimes we need to give innovation time to work before we move on to the next big innovation.

Karen Salmon, Maryland Superintendent of the Year: The whole issue of research is critical. We have seen so much written about how little the federal government spends on research as opposed to the private sector, which spends millions to refine their products. The other point is who is driving the agenda for the demise of public schools? We're influenced too much by individuals and foundations who have limited expertise. We need to drive the agenda. We are the people who have the experience in public education.

Diane Ullman, Connecticut Superintendent of the Year: We don't improve schools by changing structures and installing accountability. We improve schools by investing in our human resources. What's happening in that respect?

Thomas: I'd turn that around. You tell me. You have to be the one to drive that conversation, not me. I can't change ed schools. I think the onus primarily is on you and people like you to pressure the ed schools to say, "What are you producing, what should you be producing, and what should your programs look like?" There are efforts through Title II of the Higher Education Act to increase accountability for ed schools. But it doesn't have a huge reach. Title IV is another one and that may have a larger reach as it looks at whether a university is Title IV eligible. There is an effort to tie that into the quality of graduates that ed schools are producing. There are some problems with that.

DiChiara: I can tell you a few things. The college prep programs have two years to get it done with teachers. We — the district — are responsible for ongoing professional development. But now we have to train our teachers on all these innovations, accountability requirements — on top of fundamental professional development. If there wasn't as much of that, we could spend more time focused on helping them be better reading teachers, better math teachers. Teachers are being blamed for everything, they get lousy pay, and they don't want to come into the profession.

Chris Richardson, Minnesota Superintendent of the Year: I want to reinforce the immensity of not funding special education at the original promise of 40 percent of excess cost versus the current 17 percent we receive. We now have to take \$600 per pupil out of our local general education revenue to fund the excess cost of special education in our district. I would encourage you to say special education funding is important and we need to get it to its original promised level. If you have money left over, fund entitlements next. You don't have expertise in those areas — and until they are fully funded, it's extremely difficult for us to fund other reform areas.

Maureen LaCroix, Massachusetts Superintendent of the Year: I would like to see federal leaders consider the “Finland model.” Finland invests in teachers for their whole career. My dream at the federal level is that we say there is nothing more important than having the right teachers in front of our kids, and we say that over and over again because at the end of the day, that's what makes the difference. And, like Finland, we say from the time these kids are born, we give them whatever they need to succeed. I would love to see us as a nation say teaching is the most important profession. I would also like us to reconsider our approach to accountability. In Finland, they don't talk about accountability, and they consistently perform at the top. There is no public shaming of public educators. I think we can learn something about investment and trust from Finland. On Capitol Hill you can use the lessons from Finland to drive the national quest for achieving the highest standards in the world.

Diane Frost, North Carolina Superintendent of the Year: There is some perception that “public” has become a dirty word. So that perception piece is critical. How do we balance private interests with the common good, and what conversation do you have at this level that gets at both of those — that we are not eroding one at the expense of the other? Our public schools are the great equalizer for our country.

Thomas: I don't want to shame public education, but I think parents should have every option on the table that's available to them. The bulk of our conversation is about equity and public schools — that's our lever, and we use Title I as that lever. How do we ensure minority, low-income kids are performing as well as their more affluent peers?

Gene Harris, Ohio Superintendent of the Year: Part of our problem is that we don't have a coherent education system. We went from educating kids at a very high level to educating 100 percent of all kids, which is the right thing to do. But we didn't change the system. We're still going to school nine months. We don't have mandatory preschool education. In my city, we're trying to work with the state to really look at high-quality preschools for high-poverty kids — this is a research-based, clear strategy that will work. I would agree that we are chasing all these other strategies and we don't know if they work or not. I want to thank the congressman for pushing the envelope on pushing IDEA and special ed. I would like for you to think about the coherence in the policies you are putting together.

Thomas: It's not something we do terribly well. There are a number of things we have to fix to align those things. Someone asked what would I do if I could start from scratch. I'd like to see us move away from measuring progress in seat time to competency-based learning and mastery of content. I don't know how we change the tires on a moving bus, but I think that's what it's going to take to create that systemic coherence.

Heath Morrison, Nevada Superintendent of the Year: Take vouchers, for example. People tend to use vouchers to get away from schools that are high poverty and high English language learners. As a result, it makes the schools they are leaving more socially and economically isolated. Does that give you pause as you write policy? If you are for equity, how do you reconcile allowing a private school to do whatever it wants? We take everyone in public schools. Vouchers are not equitable.

Thomas: I support vouchers because I think parents should have all of the possible options on the table and should be able to choose. That said, I'm under no illusion that vouchers are any kind of silver bullet. There are enormous challenges. You outlined some. If we instituted universal vouchers, that's not a game changer. I'd like our schools to look like a market. There are choices of schools on a menu, and parents get to choose what they need. By market, I don't mean privatizing schools — more of a menu of choices. If we truly believe in personalized learning and giving kids the freedom and opportunities to go and find what they need at whatever point on the continuum of where they are, we need to have that full menu of options available, including public and private.

Calvin Baker, Arizona Superintendent of the Year: We have a highly decentralized system. While NCLB did it wrong, I would rather have pressure to improve put on an entire district or school than to be required to implement a specific innovation. Forcing successful schools to use specific strategies distracts and disrupts. We are very supportive of choice. We have no attendance boundaries for our four high schools and operate several charter schools. There are also neighboring private charter schools. Some are excellent. However, I have gone into others and thought, "Holy Toledo, this is terrible! Why are parents choosing this school?" The realization is that parents shop differently for schools in different neighborhoods. Immediate economic and social stresses can easily overshadow long-term education benefits. Market forces alone are not sufficient to eliminate poor schools. We must work toward a minimum quality for all schools.

Thomas: I think most parents can make good choices about their kids' education. Same is true about this broader idea about research. The other side of that is how do we educate the consumers of that research? I'm not sure it's lack of research, but more about how do you educate consumers of that research as to whether it's reliable, good research?

THE SUPERINTENDENT as Communicator in Chief

Now more than ever, superintendents play a critical role in helping their staff, parents and communities make sense of significant improvements in public education and what those improvements mean for students. At the same time, superintendents must clearly articulate and market what their schools offer in the face of critics who call for increased choice and privatization.

National Superintendent of the Year Heath Morrison talked with his colleagues about their role as communicator in chief. He said there will always be reforms and changes in education, and superintendents must be a strong voice in those changes. “We can’t wait to be invited to the party,” he said. “We need to crash it. We need to lead the conversation. We have been so grounded in just doing the work that we didn’t think we’d have to market it or sell it.”

Headline-grabbing movies such as “Waiting for Superman” and “Won’t Back Down” feed into misperceptions that public schools aren’t working and that vouchers and charters are the answer. “There’s a growing number of forces talking about public education’s failure,” Morrison said.

But the facts tell a different story. “For every five charter schools,” he said, “only one outperforms a local public school, two perform at the same rate and two perform worse.”

Making the case for change

Morrison pointed to the challenges facing public schools, noting that expectations are higher while resources and trust are lower. “There has never been a time when we could show that public education is achieving at a record high,” he said. “Yet trust in public education is at an all-time low, according to the recent Gallup poll.” Morrison urged superintendents to play a more active role in advocating for public education and for telling their stories in their communities.

Morrison described his own experience as superintendent of Washoe County School District in Reno, Nevada. The state went from the fastest-growing economy to the worst. The primary industries — construction and gaming — didn’t require a college degree or even a high school degree from their employees. But when the state’s unemployment rate climbed as high as 13 percent, Morrison used the dismal unemployment rate as a platform to talk about reinvesting in public education. His case for change: A high school diploma no longer guarantees success. But not having one is virtually a guarantee of reduced opportunities.

“We had to confront the brutal facts to get better, and we had to talk about it with our community,” he said. “We made a hard push toward early childhood education — we directed more of our federal funds there. For every dollar we spend on early childhood education, our taxpayers get \$7 back.”

The school district also was one of the first to commit to more rigorous Common Core standards. Leaders advocated for more choice to open up opportunities for students to attend schools that best met their needs. A Teacher Incentive Fund grant allowed the district to collaborate with the union to ensure everyone was focused on the right measures for teacher quality and student improvement. Greater emphasis was placed on greater transparency in making data more public and making the school district a much more efficient organization.

“Engendering that public trust and getting people to buy in to the reforms and improvements that we were driving were critically important,” Morrison recalled. “I asked to have a communications audit conducted when I joined the Reno district. We took those findings and developed a theory of action focused on communications. We decided that we would always focus on proactive, honest, two-way communications, and at every juncture we would try to be innovative.”

In the past, the district had focused messaging on what it wanted people to know about its public schools. “But we flipped it and focused messages on the primary things the public wants to know,” Morrison said. “Those issues were student achievement, taxpayer dollars, safety. These themes have to always be a part of messaging.”

Community partnerships

Morrison also focused on working with his community in new ways. The district created Parent University to help parents and caregivers become more meaningful partners in their children’s education. “We’re a majority-minority school district,” he said. “We wanted every one of our parents to be educated consumers, and we built their advocacy skills.” Morrison also led an effort to talk more about issues of race and cultural competency. “This was a huge push. We felt these were the right conversations to have.”

In addition, the district collaborated with faith-based communities, business leaders, elected officials and others to develop a compact outlining why an excellent education for every student in Reno matters. “Quality education had not been a pillar of our community.”

Launching an unprecedented partnership with higher education leaders was another key component. “We got very creative about additional opportunities to have higher education systems come into our schools and start a robust conversation around what is college readiness and how do you define it.” The district started to administer the Accuplacer to all high school juniors to work with students in their senior year and ensure they were ready for college.

Telling the story

The district also celebrated student achievement by highlighting the success stories of graduating seniors. “We wanted to communicate how difficult it is to graduate students. We told the story about the students who always graduate, but we also told the stories of students graduating for the first time and going to college. The story of a young man who didn’t miss one day of school or the young woman who lost her leg in a skiing accident but persevered. These stories conveyed to the public that there is nothing easy about our work.”

The result in Washoe County: high school graduation rates and test scores increased. Morrison’s advice to superintendents: “Tell the stories you want to tell. Don’t wait for the state to put out the test scores and then react to them. Frame the story before the media does it for you. For three years, we were narrowing gaps and improving student achievement — and these data became the lead stories in a positive light.”

When the district faced tough budget cuts, school leaders went to the community to talk about the painful decisions they would need to make and to listen to the community’s thoughts. Community outreach was extensive, including a state of education address, budget town hall meetings, speaking engagements with community and business groups, a budget survey, and social media announcements.

In 2012 the district earned the Cashman Good Government Award from the Nevada Taxpayers Association, a recognition given to those who promote efficient and timely services to Nevada citizens in a cost-effective, fiscally responsible manner.

Building your brand

Morrison encouraged superintendents to consider what their staff, community and others say about their district. “Your brand is what people say about you,” he said, adding that educational leaders and advocates need to think about what they want their brand to be and then to strive to make it a reality.

“It’s not about reacting to the latest trend but thinking about the kind of schools our kids need in the future,” Morrison said. “We know that we are going to have to stay ahead of it and be leaders in that communication. We are in the future business — the tomorrow business. We can challenge our lawmakers and our community about the changes they are putting on the table — what’s really going to drive the school districts we need?”

Conclusion

The 2012 superintendents of the year are focused on ensuring all students are successful, educators have the support they need, and the community is well-informed about school improvement efforts and what they mean for students. Conversations among the nation's top school district leaders about the Common Core standards, educator evaluation proactive communications and advocacy started and ended with a strong focus on children.

At the close of the forum, one superintendent of the year acknowledged she was hesitant to leave her school district for two days to attend the forum but agreed it was time well spent. "My state association encouraged me to come, and I'm glad that I did," said Ohio Superintendent Gene Harris. "I would strongly suggest that superintendents of the year have an opportunity to stay in contact with each other."

The 2012 superintendents of the year attending AASA's forum underscored their commitment to ensuring that in today's ever shifting educational landscape, excellent teaching, strong leadership and adequate resources are key to effective, sustainable success. Their stories from rural, urban and suburban school districts highlighted throughout this paper hold important insights and lessons for the future of public education.

2012 State Superintendents of the Year

The National Superintendent of the Year program is in its 25th year and is co-sponsored by AASA and ARAMARK Education.

Congratulations to the following leaders who were selected as the 2012 state superintendents of the year.

◆ Alabama	Larry E. DiChiara	Phenix City Public Schools
Alaska	Jim Nygaard	Cordova School District
◆ Arizona	Calvin Baker	Vail Unified School District
◆ Arkansas	Kay Johnson	Greenwood School District
◆ California	Sandra Sanchez Thorstenson	Whittier Union High School District
◆ Colorado	Charlotte Ciancio	Mapleton Public Schools
◆ Connecticut	Diane Ullman	Simsbury Public Schools
◆ Delaware	Susan Smith Bunting	Indian River School District
Florida	Wallace P. Cox	School Board of Highlands County
◆ Georgia	Emily Lembeck	Marietta City Schools
◆ Idaho	Mary Vagner	Pocatello/Chubbuck School District 25
◆ Illinois	Peter Flynn	Freeport School District 145
◆ Indiana	Jerry Thacker	Penn-Harris-Madison School Corporation
◆ Iowa	Katie S. Mulholland	Linn-Mar Community School District
◆ Kansas	Michael Mathes	Seaman Unified School District 345
◆ Kentucky	Lu Settles Young	Jessamine County Schools
Louisiana	Wayne R. Savoy	Calcasieu Parish Public Schools
◆ Maine	Suzanne T. Godin	South Portland School Department
◆ Maryland	Karen Salmon	Talbot County Public Schools
◆ Massachusetts	Maureen LaCroix	Bedford Public Schools
◆ Michigan	Tina A. Kerr	Coldwater Community Schools
◆ Minnesota	Chris Richardson	Northfield Public Schools ISD 659
Mississippi	Malcolm Kuykendall	Tishomingo County School District
◆ Missouri	Terry Adams	Wentzville R-IV School District

◆ ATTENDED THE 2012 FORUM

Montana	Daniel T. Farr	Sidney Public Schools
◆ Nebraska	Bill Mowinkel	Northwest Public Schools
◆ Nevada	Heath Morrison	Washoe County School District
◆ New Hampshire	Elaine F. Cutler	Litchfield School District
New Jersey	Roy R. Montesano	Ramsey Public Schools
New Mexico	J. Mike Phipps	Artesia Public Schools
New York	Henry L. Grishman	Jericho Union Free School District
◆ North Carolina	Diane L. Frost	Asheboro City Schools
◆ North Dakota	Richard J. Buresh	Fargo Public Schools
◆ Ohio	Gene T. Harris	Columbus City Schools
◆ Oklahoma	Robert Everett	Newcastle Public Schools
◆ Oregon	Ronald D. Wilkinson	Bend-La Pine Schools
◆ Pennsylvania	Patrick T. O'Toole	Upper St. Clair School District
◆ Rhode Island	Donna M. Ottaviano	North Providence School District
South Carolina	Joseph R. Pye	Dorchester School District 2
South Dakota	Mark Greguson	Chester Area Schools
Tennessee	Kathleen M. Airhart	Putnam County School System
◆ Texas	Jeffrey Turner	Coppell Independent School District
Utah	Jim Johnson	Iron County School District
◆ Vermont	Jeanne Collins	Burlington School District 15
◆ Virginia	Lorraine S. Lange	Roanoke County Schools
◆ Washington	Patricia Anne Banks	University Place School District 83
◆ West Virginia	Larry Edwin Parsons	Preston County Schools
◆ Wisconsin	Kristine A. Gilmore	D.C. Everest Area School District
Wyoming	Paul Grube	Sweetwater County School District 1

◆ ATTENDED THE 2012 FORUM

**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

NATIONAL SUPERINTENDENT OF THE YEAR PROGRAM

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