PREPARING EDUCATIONAL LEADERS FOR SUCCESS IN A CHALLENGING AND CONSTANTLY CHANGING WORLD

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PART I: What Is the AASA/Howard University Urban Superintendent Academy Cohort?

How can educational leaders prepare themselves for success in the role of urban superintendent? What are the characteristics of individuals who can prosper in urban districts facing unparalleled academic, social-emotional, political, and economic challenges? These essential questions are at the heart of the AASA Urban Superintendents’ Academy, a highly successful professional development and mentoring program co-sponsored by AASA, Howard University, and the University of Southern California. Serving prospective and in-service superintendents and other educational leaders from throughout the United States, the academy addresses cutting-edge issues and reinforces participants’ development of the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for successful educational leadership in urban settings.

This landmark program addresses head-on the enormous challenges confronting urban education and educators today. The Urban Superintendents Academy, currently heading into its fourth year of operation, encourages prospective, new, and in-service urban superintendents to be proactive and effective problem solvers and decision makers in response to the economic, racial and ethnic, and political challenges facing urban educators today. The academy program guidebook powerfully summarizes the unique vision and mission of this important leadership preparation program:

“Our urban public schools reflect the population we characterize as ‘global.’ The range of diversity is consistent with our recognition of a rich pool of human capital that will be the next generation to make significant contributions to the future of this nation. A large portion (over 50.3%) of our diverse student population is in our urban public schools. We must have effective leaders who will ensure that our urban school districts continue the path of improvement in the 21st Century.”

The instructional team for all Urban Superintendent Academies is comprised of award-winning current and former superintendents with extensive and long-term experience in urban centers. They include Dr. Rosa S. Atkins of Charlottesville, Virginia; Dr. Greg Thornton of Baltimore, Maryland; Dr. Christine Johns, a 16-year Superintendent of Utica Community Schools, Michigan; and Dr. Gregory Hutchings, currently Superintendent of Alexandria City Public Schools, Virginia. Academy leaders are complemented by a rich variety of guest speakers who are consistently praised for sharing their deeply personal stories and insights about lessons learned in their various leadership roles.

Another highly unique design feature of this successful leadership program is its commitment to modeling the very best in instructional and assessment design for the adult learner. As you will see in the case study below (highlighting reactions of recent program graduates), AASA and Howard University are committed to the program being inquiry-based, participant-centered, experiential, and highly relevant to the unique needs of the individual interested in pursuing the highest leadership role in a challenging urban center. Program design elements include frequent use of case studies, debates and open-ended questioning, and the preparation of participants for a collaborative “CAPSTONE Project.” The latter focuses on a consensus-driven problem of practice, for which participants propose—and, ideally, implement—a comprehensive action plan.

In addition to the rich academic experiences provided academy participants, perhaps the most significant advantage of the program is its rich system of professional networking. Every participant is assigned a mentor who works with them both on-site and via social media to ensure timely and frequent coaching, advice, and collaborative problem-solving and decision-making. The
program mentors are highly renowned experts in the challenging and continually changing role of the Urban Superintendent—and they are consistently praised by participants for the support, encouragement, and opportunities they provide for professional growth and position attainment.

To help readers understand the richness of the Urban Superintendent Academy, we have briefly summarized below the key themes and issues discussed in the 2017-18 cohort:

- September 2017: Critical Educational Issues Facing the Modern Urban Superintendent—Part I (Including Demographic and Diversity Challenges, the Changing Profile of the Urban Leader, the Need for a Systems Approach to Educational Transformation; and the Increasingly Powerful Role of Social-Emotional Development in Academic Achievement)

- October 2017: Critical Educational Issues Facing the Modern Urban Superintendent—Part I (The Challenges of the Urban Superintendent Role, Including Perceptions of “Impossibility”; Addressing Achievement Gaps; Reform of Educational Structures; Addressing the Complex Needs of Urban Communities; Overcoming Contemporary Deficit Thinking in Education)

- November 2017: Community Relations and Politics of the Urban Superintendent (The Importance of Community Relations; Dealing with Competing Stakeholder Group Priorities and Demands; Conducting a Mock Press Conference; The Power of Collaboration in Transforming Student Test Scores and Other Performance Indicators; 21 Trends for Education in the 21st Century; The Importance of Business and Community Stakeholder Partnerships and Outreach)

- December 2017: Urban Leadership (Part I) (“Ten Commandments” for the Successful Urban Superintendent; Promoting and Performing as a High Performing Governance Leadership Team; The Implications of ESSA; Understanding the Budget Process in Urban Centers; Case Studies in Urban Leadership)

- January 2018: Urban Leadership (Part II) (Root-Cause Analysis of Low-Achieving Districts and Low-Performing Boards; Human Resources and the Urban Superintendent; Case Study of the AVID Program; Promoting Quality Staffing and Ensuring Retention; Public Relations “Do’s and Don’ts”)

- February 2018: Urban Schools and Urban School Boards (The Key Work of Urban School Boards; Challenges to the Modern Urban Superintendent; Job Postings—and What to Do With Them; Goal Attainment and Practical Realities of Becoming an Urban Superintendent)

- March 2018: Goal Attainment and the Practical Realities of Becoming an Urban Superintendent (An Overview of the “State of the Superintendent” Today; “A Guide for the Powerless and Those Who Don’t Know Their Own Power”; The Reform-Minded Superintendent; Strength-Based Leadership; Helping to Create and Sustain Effective Boards; The Female Superintendent; Building Relationships with Lawmakers and Why It’s Important; Building Partnerships with Teacher Unions)

- April 2018: Dealing with Relationship Building and Human Resource Demands (Addressing Equity Issues, Including Equal Pay; Addressing Racism with a Focus on Black Males; Strategic Thinking and Planning; Ongoing Case Study Analysis: The Importance of Collegiality, Partnership, and Communication in Dealing with Key Stakeholder Groups)

- May 2018: Strategic Thinking and Planning (Current Theories and Practice Related to Systems Improvement; Strategic Planning—What Works? Case Studies in School and Systemic Improvement in Urban Centers; Simulated Press Conferences—Now That I Am Superintendent; Presentation of Case Studies; Reflections on the Future and Prospects for Sustained Networking)

PART II: A Case Study of Participants’ Experiences This Year

As this AASA program prepares to enter its fourth cohort year and continues its outstanding record of empowering multiple urban superintendents for success, we thought our readers might benefit from hearing from recent graduates of the program—and their reflections on contemporary educational leadership, their future plans for success as current or prospective superintendents, and their advice to other educational leaders, especially those serving urban districts.

1. What does the term “urban superintendent” mean to you?

This question is one of the most frequently asked of AASA Urban Superintendents’ Academy leaders and participants. We have shared various responses to this question from current graduates below, but two universal patterns have emerged throughout the duration of the academy: (a) There is clear consensus among all participants that we are facing today an unprecedented era in public education, one fraught with controversy, challenge, and continuous change. All educational leaders—regardless of their role and location—must become purposeful and effective managers of the change process, engaging all stakeholder groups in sustained discourse about how to achieve desired long-range goals and address the potential and challenges of serving diverse student populations; and (b) Teaching and learning today must incorporate what we now know about cognitive learning theory and neuroscience: Learners (whether adults or in-school students) succeed when they are intellectually involved and emotionally engaged in authentic, inquiry-based, and real-world problem-solving and scenario investigation.

The dynamics of leading during this new age of continual information exchange (and occasional information overload) and breath-taking technological transformation are compounded for the urban educational leader by several additional key issues. Participants in the academy—including both aspiring and
in-service superintendents—all agree that the effective urban leader must be a dynamic and ethical facilitator of change, a politically astute outreach agent to competing stakeholder groups, and a social scientist fully versed in practical research about addressing the cognitive, social-emotional, developmental, and physical needs of students today. Virtually every module of the academy—both this year and in previous cycles—has revisited issues of student mobility, patterns of underachievement, declining graduation rates, and growing demands associated with students’ socio-economic and language diversity.

Here are a few representative responses from recent program graduates about their understanding of the term “urban superintendent” and the unique challenges facing individuals in that leadership role:

• Omolara Akin-Tanivo concludes this discussion by summarizing that: “School systems in metro areas are characterized by a combination of high-to-low income and high minority student populations.”

• Similarly, Mini’imah Shaheed of KIPP Metro Atlanta, concludes that in light of conditions facing urban school districts today, an effective urban superintendent must be a “leader for equity, a lead teacher, and a key influencer.”

• Terry Nelson, a Director of Curriculum, Professional Learning, and Testing, states that “the term ‘urban superintendent’ refers to a leader of a school district with diversity of students and challenges, primarily consisting of large-city metropolitan areas.”

• Similarly, Kevin Edwards, a current Deputy Superintendent, describes the ideal urban superintendent as a “leader of students who must communicate, influence, facilitate change, and be transformative.”

• Finally, Howard University graduate student and academy participant Omolara Akin-Tanivo suggests that “the term ‘urban superintendent’ refers to someone who is an advocate, leader, and practitioner of public education who benefits all children with emphasis upon equity.”

2. In your opinion, how does the role of urban superintendent differ from the role of superintendent in an urban or suburban setting?

Continuing this theme of generating an operational definition for the term “urban superintendent,” academy leaders and participants strongly agreed that differences among superintendents tend to be more a matter of “degree rather than kind.” In other words, all superintendents today are confronting major issues related to the processes of institutional change and transformation. Similarly, they are universally grappling with constituent group demands for more engaging classrooms, expanding funding to support technology and infrastructure, and raising professional expectations for staff involvement in the processes of decision-making and problem-solving.

While these and other commonalities affect all contemporary superintendents, academy presenters and participants emphasized that the following issues present unique challenges to urban educational leaders: (a) rising expectations in the face of shrinking urban school system budgets; (b) transience and mobility among increasingly diverse student populations; (c) unique opportunities and inherent organizational challenges associated with growing levels of language diversity and immigration patterns; (d) declining resources to ensure growth in technological and related educational infrastructure; and (e) growing evidence of political disagreement and frequent lack of consensus among urban stakeholder groups.

A majority of academy graduates agree that educational leadership today requires individuals with a solid ethical and principled approach to education. They also concur that given the high mobility rate of urban superintendents (with an in-district tenure averaging between two to three years, according to several academy presenters), an effective urban superintendent must have a long-range vision and goals combined with a succession plan to sustain that vision when he or she moves on (as most agreed seems to be an organizational inevitability).

Participants in this year’s cohort gave parallel answers to the question of how the urban superintendent’s role may differ from that in a suburban or urban setting:

• “There are many more complex variables which require intentional efforts relative to equity, achievement gaps, and resources,” according to Dr. Beasley.

• Although Mini’imah Shaheed agrees that the role of a superintendent in any region has similarities, “The urban superintendent role presents more complex dynamics and factors that must be addressed, especially key issues related to equity.”

• Similarly, Terry Nelson states that “the skills set and understanding of complex problems are different in an urban setting, especially the prevalence of issues of poverty, homelessness, and inequities.”

• “Equity issues in urban [settings] are greater than suburban districts. Urban superintendents continually deal with poverty issues and homelessness,” according to Kevin Edwards.

• Omolara Akin-Tanivo concludes this discussion by summarizing three key requirements for the urban superintendent: “responsibility, integrity, and courage.”

3. What are the skills, knowledge, and experiences that candidates should demonstrate if they are to be successful as an urban superintendent?

The design of the AASA Urban Superintendents’ Academy reflects key themes inherent in the universal responsibilities of successful superintendents today, including: (a) instructional leadership; (b) deep knowledge of curriculum design and implementation; (c) effective data analysis and interpretation (including moving staff beyond teach-to-the-test approaches to learning in favor of balanced and authentic assessment measures); (d) administration and supervision competencies, including the capacity for articulating and reinforcing law, policy, and regulations while engaging individuals and stakeholder
groups in the processes of strategic planning, shared inquiry, long-range project planning, and collaborative decision-making and problem-solving; (e) fiscal management, including developing and managing budgets during times of fiscal constraint and limitations; (f) human resource management; (g) professional learning and development; and (h) Board and constituent outreach and relationships.

As suggested previously, all presenters and participants agreed that effective urban superintendents must become effective organization developers, capable of establishing and reinforcing ethical and principled norms and practices in the light of competing priorities and challenges. In effect, a great urban superintendent is an experienced facilitator and manager of the change process. Many of the modules that formed this year’s (and previous) academic workshops emphasized the importance of understanding and promoting professional learning communities, instructional rounds, peer coaching, and action research. Increasingly, presenters asserted that unless individuals and groups at the closest levels of participation are involved in the decision-making and problem-solving process, educational systems can become hidebound and counterproductive.

Our recent graduates echoed these important themes in their responses to the question concerning the skills and knowledge required of effective urban superintendents:

• Dr. Beasley suggests that an effective urban superintendent requires “a balance of content, competence, leadership, emotional intelligence, and courage.”

• This focus on principles and ethical leadership is underscored by Mini’imah Shaeed, whose list includes: “emotional intelligence, passion, resilience, competence, integrity, compassion, intelligence, confidence, grace, love, courage, and connectedness.”

• According to Terry Nelson, an effective urban superintendent “must be politically savvy, well versed in current educational trends and contemporary issues, and able to galvanize critical friends to achieve goals.”

• Kevin Edwards echoed another recurrent theme, i.e., the need for an urban superintendent to be a true instructional leader: “As an aspiring superintendent, my career history is thoroughly immersed in instruction. My history assists me in understanding the urban superintendent’s job.”

• Omolara Akin-Tanivo summarizes the essence of this conversation by stating: “A superintendent should be highly competent in pedagogy but must also be political and have good communication skills to relate and carry all along.”

4. Where are you in your own professional history (e.g., aspirng superintendent, beginning superintendent, experienced superintendent)? How does your own career history shape and influence your perceptions of the role of urban superintendent?

A unique feature of the AASA Urban Superintendents’ Academy is the diverse range of roles and responsibilities held by recent and previous participants. Participating cohorts typically range from relatively new but in-service urban superintendents to Chief Academic Officers and Chief Operating Officers as well as director-level leaders in central office positions. The affiliation with both Howard University and the University of Southern California also ensures that some participants are graduate students at the doctoral level, each of whom is receiving a unique educational experience prior to their assuming future educational leadership roles.

That said, virtually all academy graduates stressed the value and power of their interactions with great superintendents and other educational leaders who presented at various academy sessions. As their responses below will indicate, participants considered their experiences within the academy an extension of both their existing roles and a precursor to their achievement of future professional goals:

• “I am a beginning superintendent. My career history is key to shaping my positive view of the role of the superintendent and the influence it has,” affirms Dr. Morecease J. Beasley.

• “I am an aspiring superintendent. I feel as if I have been called to this position, but I still want to prepare and use this academy as part of that preparation process,” according to Mini’imah Shaeed.

• “I am an aspiring superintendent for a medium-size school district. I have held several leadership positions which afforded me preparation for this role,” states Terry Nelson.
Kevin Edward, a current Deputy Superintendent, declares: "I am an aspiring superintendent. My career history is thoroughly immersed in instruction. My history assists me in understanding the urban superintendent’s job."

Finally, the voice of the student is reflected in Omolara Akin-Tanivo’s response: "I’m a teacher leader and a doctoral student. I’m grateful to be learning early in my career."

5. What have your own professional experiences taught you about what to do—and what not to do—in the role of urban superintendent? What are the most important “lessons learned” that you can share?

The AASA Urban Superintendents’ Academy can be seen as a forum for “lessons learned.” The entire group within each academy cohort joined forces with outstanding educational leader presenters to form true communities of inquiry, discourse, debate, and conflict resolution. The power of the academy—as you will discover in the participants’ reactions below—involves its value as a catalyst for synthesizing the best in what we now know about effective educational leadership—and the unique aspects of that role when leaders confront the challenges and opportunities of urban districts:

• Dr. Beasley, for example, summarizes that: “My lessons learned include the need to (1) frame the conversation, (2) be competent, (3) take time and push when necessary, and (4) be the leader you want to be.”

• Similarly, Mini’imah Shaheed states that to be a great urban superintendent is to: “Lead with integrity. Speak and advocate for equity. Influence. Engage all stakeholder groups. Be a strategic/systems thinker.”

• Terry Nelson confirms that to be an effective urban leader, you must be: “mission- and vision-driven. Be trustworthy and a person of character and integrity.”

• “Always tell the truth,” Kevin Edwards declares. “Lead by example. Communicate effectively. Always conduct yourself as if this is a reflection on you.”

• “I have learned a lot about what not to do in terms of relationships with the Board and staff,” Omolara Akin-Tanivo reflects. She also declares that she learned many lessons about “terms of comportment.”

6. What recommendations can you make to educators as they consider their own career path? In your opinion, how can they be certain that the role of urban superintendent is the right path for them?

Experience, experience, experience…This concept was a recurrent mantra among both presenters and participants involved with the academy. Everyone concurs that it is impossible for an urban superintendent to succeed without a range of professional expertise and direct experience in the areas of teaching and learning, administration and supervision, assessment and accountability, budget and fiscal management, human resource management, and community outreach and public relations:

• Dr. Beasley, for example, asserts: “I recommend a diversity of experiences such as teacher, administrator at the school level, and administrator at central office levels. I suggest a variety of central office roles that include instruction, leadership finance.”

• Mini’imah declares in response to this question: “Join the Urban Superintendents’ Academy! Seek guidance from sitting superintendents. Shadow.”

• Terry Nelson emphasizes the need to: “Work to develop competencies in multiple areas, learn from all experiences, and become thin-skinned to deal with the complexities of the work.”

• “I would recommend to educators, suggests Kevin Edwards, “to continue to ‘sharpen your saw.’ Look internally and ask yourself: What do I want to do with this work?”

• Omolara Akin-Tanivo concludes: “[Effective urban superintendents] have to be people with high emotional intelligence. For me, bottom line is if you’re not emotionally stable, you cannot be a superintendent!”

7. As a member of the AASA Urban Superintendents’ Academy, what insights and experiences have you had that have shaped and influenced your perceptions of this important leadership role? Specifically, how has your understanding of the role of urban superintendent been reinforced—or changed—as a result of your participation?

Participants almost universally affirmed that the academy experience both reinforced their prior experience and professional learning and introduced them to a spectacular range of educational leaders whose deep experience inspired and motivated them to grow professionally. They were also in consensus about the engaging ways in which presenters reinforced for them deep lessons learned that reflected a kind of “wisdom tradition”: i.e., the passing down of insight and experience from one generation or seasoned leadership group to newer individuals interested in