

# Transforming Our Schools

**National  
Superintendent  
of the Year Forum  
2008**



American Association of School Administrators

### About the American Association of School Administrators



The American Association of School Administrators, 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 the National Superintendent of the Year Program

Established in 1988, the National Superintendent of the Year Award recognizes outstanding leadership among superintendents. State selection committees choose the state winners and a national blue ribbon panel selects four finalists from whom the National Superintendent of the Year is chosen. The 2008 National Superintendent of the Year is Rudy Crew, formerly of Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

### About ARAMARK Education



ARAMARK Education provides a complete range of food, facility, uniform and other support services to more than 500 K–12 school districts in the United States. It offers public and private education institutions a family of dining and facility services, including on-site and off-site breakfast and lunch meal programs, after-school snacks, catering and nutrition education; retail design and operations; maintenance, custodial and grounds services; energy management; construction management; and building commissioning. For more information about ARAMARK's K–12 food service programs, please visit [www.aramarkschools.com](http://www.aramarkschools.com).

### About ING and the ING Foundation



ING is a global financial institution of Dutch origin offering banking, investments, life insurance and retirement services to more than 85 million private, corporate and institutional clients in more than 50 countries. The ING Foundation's mission is to improve the quality of life in the communities where ING operates and its employees and customers live. Through charitable giving and employee volunteerism, the foundation focuses on sustainable programs in the areas of financial literacy, children's education and diversity. For more information, visit [www.ing.com](http://www.ing.com).

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# Contents

Introduction	2
Schools, Communities, Governance: The Next Chapter in Transformation	3
Starting the Conversation About Transformation	6
How Superintendents Promote Transformation	9
How AASA Can Support Superintendent Leadership and Student Success	13
Conclusion	14
2008 State Superintendents of the Year	15

## Introduction

In October 2008, the American Association of School Administrators invited superintendents of the year from across the country to gather in Denver, Colo., for three days of intensive dialogue about the challenges facing today's district leaders.

Representing rural, urban and suburban districts, state award winners came to listen, share best practices and talk candidly about lessons learned that focused on how they transformed their public schools. While their approaches varied, the end result was the same: improved learning, teaching and achievement for students.

Moving from a new, promising idea to its effective implementation districtwide is a huge challenge. If done poorly, transformation can quickly backfire and stir upheaval in the ranks, break a sacred trust with the community or even cost a superintendent his or her job. Transformation requires a well-thought-out approach, bold leadership and patience. And we are just getting started.

This publication captures the best thinking of those attending the Superintendent of the Year Forum and examines the elements of successful transformation. AASA wishes to thank the superintendents who participated in the forum. We are hopeful we have captured your observations with the same vigor and integrity with which you shared them.

## Schools, Communities, Governance: The Next Chapter in Transformation

Every superintendent who attended the Denver forum shared a common experience: They were successful in improving student achievement in their school district. The superintendents also acknowledged there is always room for improvement, even in the best-performing school districts. Success also requires superintendents to have a keen awareness of trends and how they impact schools, to think creatively, to be nimble and to be responsive to market demands.

2008 National Superintendent of the Year Rudy Crew, who led Miami-Dade County Public Schools from 2004 to 2008, told participants that public education is falling short in responding to customers' demands. If left unaddressed, it could spell disaster for public education. "Our model is flawed," said Crew. "We are not nimble. We are not quick. We are not able to redesign our schools and market a high-quality menu of offerings to a varied community. That's got to change if we want to survive."

Survival, in Crew's view, requires public school leaders to shift their current emphasis on supply to demand. Charter schools, home schooling, online learning and other competitors are responding to customer demand. They are creating schools focused on unique niche areas such as foreign languages, the arts or technology. "The system is not listening to what parents want," said Crew. "We didn't know you wanted your child to take French or Mandarin Chinese, and before we figured it out, a charter school opened a foreign language school."

There's a bottom-line imperative, too, that Crew experienced firsthand as a superintendent: In Miami, 30,000 children attend charter schools, and that number has grown by 10 percent each year, according to Crew. The loss in funding to a district when students choose to leave can be devastating.

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— 2008 National Superintendent of the Year Rudy Crew

*“We must move rapidly to make this change. The public has lost confidence in us.”*

— Illinois Superintendent of the Year  
Blondean Davis

The sense of urgency to respond is palpable. Parents, community members and taxpayers are demanding that their investment in public education reap results — with all kinds of learners. “Can you give me kids who are rigorously involved in advanced calculus as opposed to bonehead math? And can you do it for black kids from families of poverty or brown kids whose first language is not English?” asked Crew.

The issue of showing results for taxpayers’ investment resonated with superintendents. “In my state, business leaders, the community and legislators are saying ‘no more money’ because public schools are graduating students who are not academically prepared to succeed,” said Illinois Superintendent of the Year Blondean Davis. “We feel the pressure of the charter school movement to the point that they seem to be influencing who sits in the legislature. We must move rapidly to make this change. The public has lost confidence in us.”

The nation’s president will be under intense pressure to deliver, too, said Crew. “Our president will have to strike a new deal for public education, and it won’t be different than the new deals Congress struck with these banks that went out of business: ‘We’ll gobble you up. Invest money in you, but by god, you’d better come out of this and make us internationally competitive.’”

Some superintendents attending the forum are responding to customer demands by offering more academic choices for students. South Carolina Superintendent of the Year Betty Bagley increased the numbers of magnet and theme schools in her district. These schools specialize in different disciplines such as the arts, communications and technology. Schools focused on international studies, engineering and an International Baccalaureate program are in the works. “It’s the same curriculum at every school, but with a little different focus, depending on the specialty area.”

The move also was in direct response to pro-voucher advocates. “I want our 18 campuses to be inviting and places people will not want to leave,” said Bagley. “I believe that providing a variety of public school choices is the wave of the future, and we want to be ready.”

In addition to meeting customer demand and offering a more varied menu of learning opportunities, Crew urged his colleagues to step back, reflect and gauge what’s next for public education by converting data into knowledge and knowledge into strategy. “If someone said to you, ‘We’re only going to pay for the things that work in your district — math instruction, literacy and science instruction. Put a dollar amount on it,’ would you know what to invest in? We need to get bone clear about how to add value.” Superintendents must remember to weed out what’s not working, too.

Public schools also are up against challenges they haven’t faced in the past such as changing student demographics, savvier and more demanding customers, and increased competition. Crew asked his colleagues whether they can “do surgery” in their districts and put them back together in a way that gets results for children who weren’t in their cities or towns some 20 years ago, such as children from homes of poverty or homes where English is not the first language. “That’s what America is really struggling with now,” said Crew. “We have to be able to say (to customers) that we can serve you, meet your child’s academic needs and get results.”

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— 2008 National Superintendent  
of the Year Rudy Crew

## Starting the Conversation About Transformation

*“Start with your board if you want change to take root. Make sure you are doing a lot of talking and listening. Don’t be afraid to go back to the drawing board.”*

— South Carolina Superintendent of the Year  
Betty Bagley

Transforming a school district takes leadership, commitment and time. It also requires the support of stakeholders. Superintendents of the Year identified who in their communities were most critical to talk with early on about transformation and what conversations were most significant to have with these stakeholders.

The most-often-mentioned stakeholders included:

- **Community members and leaders.** The general public’s understanding and support of transformation are critical. Not only is it important for districts to gain the community’s permission for major change, advised some superintendents, but community leaders play a critical role in endorsing and promoting change in the face of criticism. Important to this work is educating the community about district goals and strategies for reaching student achievement goals.
- **School board members.** As key communicators to the public, school board members help district leaders spread the word about the need for transformational change and what the proposed change will mean, not only for students but for the broader community. They also can help superintendents take the community’s pulse about an issue. “Start with your board if you want change to take root,” advised Bagley. “Make sure you are doing a lot of talking and listening. Don’t be afraid to go back to the drawing board.”
- **Students.** To find out why a teacher is successful or what makes for an exciting learning experience, go to the source: students. “We asked our kids questions like what’s your favorite class and why?” said Colorado Superintendent of the Year Mary Rubadeau. “We also asked students who was working the hardest in their classroom, and the answer was always ‘teachers.’ We knew we had to help students see that it was a collaborative effort.” The student conversation in Telluride, Colo., led to a clearer vision



and methods for evaluating strategies, such as teacher-student collaborations for learning. Other districts have asked students what a highly successful high school graduate looks like: What do you want me to know about you? How can I better use new technology, such as MySpace.com, as a learning tool? (Under teachers' guidance, students in Cottage Grove, Ore., use MySpace.com to work on school projects and edit each other's work.) "Kids are so different than when I went to school," said Bagley. "They are the key to what our vision should be."

- **Business leaders.** Conversations with business leaders and owners can provide a clearer understanding of skills and knowledge that high school graduates must possess 10 to 15 years from now to succeed in the workforce. They bring expertise that should not be overlooked by educators, said several superintendents.
- **State legislators.** Policymakers charged with shaping education policy that directly impacts the classroom and districtwide transformation comprise an influential audience. "Our district is located in the state capital, and I spend a lot of time talking with legislators," said North Dakota Superintendent of the Year Paul Johnson. "In a smaller state like ours, you have a real opportunity to make a difference."
- **Major education leaders.** The ability to speak in one, unified voice to leaders of education-related organizations about superintendents' vision for public education also affects whether transformation is successful. Often, a state's education leaders are a direct conduit to state lawmakers and can help influence policies and practice.
- **Higher education leaders.** More conversations between K–12 and higher education leaders on how to transform their systems to better serve students must take place.

Superintendents also underscored the importance of customizing the core messages slightly for different audiences. For example, teachers may be more interested in how the district will provide professional development and support them through the transformation, while business leaders may want to know how the transformation will result in high school graduates who are better prepared for the workforce. It is important to connect the message to what the targeted audience values.

Other conversation topics of interest to discuss with parents, staff and the community included 21st century skills; new models for P–16 systems; efficiency of district and school operations; funding; more prekindergarten courses; time for learning and teaching; and even why transformation is needed in the first place. As one superintendent said, not all communities think change is necessary.

## How Superintendents Promote Transformation

For Wisconsin Superintendent of the Year James Rickabaugh, transformation starts with one question: What would it take to make sure all kids learn at high levels? The answers help shape the district's vision and direction. The hard work begins with clearly defining what students should know and be able to do from one grade to the next.

"If we are clear on the absolute bottom line of what we want kids to come out of high school with, then we could deliver it in lots of ways, such as online, in regular classrooms or at night," added Johnson.

Most superintendents attending the forum agreed that minor tweaking or lack of bold leadership will not result in long-term, sustainable change. Yet, they acknowledged that the political realities of a school district's top leadership job can challenge that notion. "What good does it do to lose your job over a structural change that the district will end once you are gone?" asked Johnson. "It's a process over time to persuade and convince."

Valid, reliable data can help promote the need for transformation. Data help put an end to speculation and guesswork. Data also force staff, parents and the community to face tough realities about student learning and achievement. "Our data systems are important because that's how we are confronted with the truth," said Johnson. "We've got to pay attention to that and not pretend we are perfect." Even in higher-performing districts, attendees acknowledged there's always room to grow and improve.

Superintendents also can promote transformation by shifting their thinking about principals and viewing them more as instructional leaders and less so as managers. "We have morphed from building management to instructional leadership, and in seven years, we have turned over all principals but one," said Missouri Superintendent of the Year Larry Ewing. "The ever-increasing performance expectations placed upon building-level administrators make their jobs very challenging."

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— North Dakota Superintendent of the Year  
Paul Johnson

## Strategies for Promoting Transformation in Education

- Develop a vision and a clear direction.
- Determine what students should know and be able to do.
- Use data to confront the truth about student achievement, and then talk about it.
- Create a sense of urgency.
- Think of principals as instructional leaders rather than managers.
- Know the principal cannot do it all; each principal needs a team.
- Train employees and give them resources and time.
- Tolerate mistakes.
- Focus on transforming education instead of minor tweaking.
- Know that secondary education is the most difficult to change.
- Have patience.

It's also important, said superintendents, to accept that principals can't do everything — be the disciplinarian, the grant report writer, the teacher evaluator, the instructional leader — all at the same time. It takes a school team to ensure transformational success. "Compared to just five years ago, more and more principals are now hired in their positions because of their instructional skills," said Connecticut Superintendent of the Year Robert Villanova. "It takes complete focus to stay involved in teaching and learning versus management work. I encourage my principals to stay in the heart of the work."

Transformation must also center on promoting strategies that educate the whole child. Other countries that are successfully educating their children keep this front and center. Rickabaugh shared this example: "When I asked people from a school in China what transformation is, they said they make sure that what they teach kids applies in life. They also teach the whole child, including the arts and physical education, and encourage teachers to collaborate more. China is training a generation of teachers to get that done; they are not trying to get the 20- to 30-year teacher to change. They're doing the same thing we're doing, but going about it differently."

## One District's Success Story

2007 National Superintendent of the Year Krista Parent of Oregon shared the top 10 most critical factors in South Lane School District's successful efforts to improve student achievement, reduce dropout rates and increase parent involvement. The factors cut across districts large and small, rural and urban; they provide insights that can be adapted elsewhere.

Top 10 factors for successful transformation:

- **Community engagement.** Citizens were asked what they would do to improve the district. Responses included partnering with home-school families; providing modern facilities and classrooms; and increasing parent engagement, especially at the secondary level.
- **Transparency in the budget process.** Employees and the community were educated in "district and school budgeting 101," and then asked to prioritize budget items using an online survey. By the end, they had a good idea of how the budgeting process works and the district better understood what they valued most.
- **Clear communication.** Research showed the district that the most negative information about schools comes from within. The district developed a comprehensive communications plan that included lots of listening and conversation to correct misperceptions about the district with reality. Employees also received regular communication about what's going on in the district and how to help parents make sense of it.
- **Shared beliefs and vision.** Conversations over time with staff, parents and the community led to the creation of a clear, focused vision that said children come first, decision making is student-centered, and children learn best when they want to be in school.
- **Leadership.** The leadership team conducted an assessment of its skills and areas of improvement, such as the need to be more effective change agents and the ability to stay on top of the latest research. Additional areas of focus included children's literature and literacy interventions.
- **Central-office support.** The cabinet was overhauled and the superintendent hired four top instructional leaders. Central office is now focused more than ever on teaching and learning. Even meetings have been restructured to support the district's goals. Monday meetings last no more than 15 minutes and provide a quick check-in. Friday cabinet meetings focus on progress against goals. More strategic meetings tackle one major topic over a longer period of time.
- **Doing the right work.** In the past, there wasn't much focus during administrative council meetings on transforming the system to support student achievement. The council agreed that if they could get the literacy piece right, everything else would follow. Leaders spent a good chunk of time over two years learning about literacy. Each member of the cabinet team had to pick a book about literacy and teach the rest of the cabinet what he or she had learned.

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- ***Strong curricular focus.*** The superintendent asked each administrator to develop an individual leadership literacy plan. Each plan focused on 10 components, including my personal philosophy about literacy, ways I am currently supporting literacy, specific action steps to achieve literacy goals, and staff development and training goals. The superintendent crafted her own plan first to introduce the model to her team.
- ***Developing a culture of learning together.*** Two years studying literacy resulted in a well-read team, but the superintendent wasn't so sure that this new knowledge was taking root in the classroom. The superintendent created a coaching commitment team to help. The teams coach colleagues to put in place practices that focus on instructional leadership and less on managerial tasks. Each team is made up of a district administrator, elementary principal, secondary principal and administrative intern (teacher leader). Now, everyone is on the same page in terms of what quality instruction and learning look like.
- ***Job-embedded professional development.*** The district focused on making its professional development more effective and relevant. A Studio Classroom is a live classroom run by a "studio" teacher who is part of a larger team made up of a consultant, a coach and 14 resident teachers from across the district. Studio Classrooms focus on math and writing. The coach will whisper

ideas in the teacher's ear if the teacher is struggling. Attention is also placed on what students say about the teacher's lesson. The consultant leads a debrief after observation. The same approach is now being used for leadership training that includes principals, the superintendent, assistant superintendent, coach and consultant.

"I had to give them permission to challenge the status quo," said Parent. "We had to have honest and courageous conversations. We had to push each other about how things had always been and how we could do them differently. I also worked closely with the school board and getting its work aligned with teaching and learning."

For more about the South Lane School District's success, visit [www.slane.k12.or.us](http://www.slane.k12.or.us). To obtain a copy of Parent's comprehensive PowerPoint presentation, contact AASA's Superintendent of the Year Program.

## How AASA Can Support Superintendent Leadership and Student Success

AASA is the premier leadership association representing superintendents, and superintendents shared some ideas about how AASA can help support leadership and student success:

- **Assess leadership skills.** Help superintendents better assess their leadership strengths and challenges on a more individual level.
- **Market AASA and its value-add.** Talk to district leaders who are not currently members to find out why and tap superintendents of the year to help market the organization locally or regionally.
- **Be a bold voice for change.** Shape and promote messages focused on greater parental involvement, better serving kids of poverty, championing more educational offerings and pushing back on critics' misinformation. Speak with one voice.
- **Say what you mean.** Promote transformation in language the public understands. Avoid jargon.
- **Promote what works.** Share best practices with members in a more comprehensive and broad manner. Tell the stories of schools and districts that are successful.
- **Better connect the dots.** Help stakeholders — parents, community members, senior citizens and others — clearly understand why providing the best possible education to our children is critical to them and to us as a nation.

### **The Impact of Poverty on Achievement: A Major Focus for AASA**

Research shows that poverty is a major predictor of a child's success in school. While some districts show promise meeting the educational needs of children from low-income families, too often they are left behind. That has to change, said new AASA Executive Director Dan Domenech. "Good schools are important, but poverty is the one factor that makes all the difference."

AASA is advocating that Title I dollars, earmarked to improve education for children of poverty, are better focused on the "total" child. "It starts at inception," said Domenech. "The fact is that medical attention is not at the same level of quality for a child or for the mother in poverty. Child care is also inferior."

That disparity between students from low-income homes and high-income homes continues when they set foot in school. The gap in school readiness is large. "We have to close that achievement gap, and we have to work on starting much earlier — with child care, health care, preschool programs, full-day kindergarten," said Domenech.

The most critical question is whether the will exists at the federal level to invest the kind of dollars necessary to turn around this alarming trend — a \$42 billion investment, said Domenech. "No other country has the mission we have set for ourselves, which is to educate all children and not a select few. Money *does* make a difference."

## Conclusion

A superintendent's job to lead transformational change is not without challenges. Staff and communities must understand the why, what and how of change — all of which require reliable and valid data, clear communication and time. Taxpayers must see that their investment is paying off in well-educated students — no matter if the learner is from a family of poverty or whose first language is not English. Parents also are demanding greater choice in programs, services and instruction. Public education must not only be able to create demand for what it offers but meet the demand for excellent education. Otherwise its customers will go elsewhere.

In response, superintendents are thinking in bold and creative ways about learning and teaching. They are pushing back on old practices that fail to reap results for children. They are using data to face the hard truths about which students are learning, which students are not and why. Although they are among the best education leaders in the country, the superintendents of the year attending the forum in Denver returned to their communities knowing there is always room for improvement. This time, they will be armed with additional best practices, lessons learned and further affirmation of the important role they play in transformation.



## 2008 State Superintendents of the Year

The National Superintendent of the Year Program is in its 21st year and is co-sponsored by AASA, ARAMARK Education and ING.

Congratulations to the following leaders who were selected as the 2008 state superintendents of the year:

STATE	SUPERINTENDENT	DISTRICT
Alabama	Ann R. Moore	Huntsville City Schools, Huntsville
Alaska	Richard E. Carlson	Klawock City School District, Klawock
Arizona	Debra L. Duvall	Mesa Unified School District 4, Mesa
Arkansas	Andrew Tolbert	Warren School District 1, Warren
California	Donald A. Phillips	Poway Unified School District, Poway
Colorado	Mary E. Rubadeau	Telluride School District R-1, Telluride
Connecticut	Robert M. Villanova	Farmington Public Schools, Farmington
Delaware	Harold Roberts	Rodney District Office, Camden Wyoming
Florida	Rudolph F. Crew	Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Miami
Georgia	Robert R. Saunders	Barrow County Schools, Winder
Idaho	Richard H. Bauscher	Middleton School District 134, Middleton
Illinois	Blondean Y. Davis	Matteson Elementary School District 162, Matteson
Indiana	Allen B. Bourff	Richmond Community Schools, Richmond
Iowa	Glenn M. Pelecky	Mississippi Bend Area Education Agency, Bettendorf
Kansas	James E. Lentz	Augusta Unified School District 402, Augusta
Kentucky	Larry D. Vick	Owensboro Independent Schools, Owensboro
Louisiana	Doris Voitier	St Bernard Parish Schools, Chalmette
Maine	Michael R. Cormier	Maine School Administrative District 9, Farmington
Maryland	Jacqueline C. Haas	Harford County Public School District, Bel Air
Massachusetts	Christopher H. Martes	Foxborough Public Schools, Foxborough
Michigan	Thomas G. Maridada, II	Inkster Public Schools, Inkster
Minnesota	Mark A. Robertson	Fridley Independent School District #14, Fridley
Mississippi	Tommye C. Henderson	Clinton Public School District, Clinton

STATE	SUPERINTENDENT	DISTRICT
Missouri	Larry E. Ewing	Fort Osage R-I School District, Independence
Montana	Jerry L. House	Whitefish School District 44, Whitefish
Nebraska	Larry F. Ramaekers	Aurora Public Schools, Aurora
Nevada	William E. Roberts	Nye County School District, Tonopah
New Hampshire	Carl J. Nelson	School Administrative Unit 9, Conway
New Jersey	Anthony S. DeNorchia	Hillsdale Public Schools, Hillsdale
New Mexico	Dan Flores	Santa Rosa Cons School District 8, Santa Rosa
New York	Judith A. Johnson	Peekskill City School District, Peekskill
North Carolina	Terry B. Grier	Guilford County Schools, Greensboro
North Dakota	Paul K. Johnson	Bismarck Public Schools, Bismarck
Ohio	Robert A. Mengerink	Kettering City Schools, Kettering
Oklahoma	Paul D. Hurst	Putnam City School District 1, Oklahoma City
Oregon	Ronald J. Naso	North Clackamas School District, Milwaukie
Pennsylvania	Rudolph F. Karkosak	Kennett Consolidated School District, Kennett Square
Rhode Island	Margaret A. Iacovelli	Johnston Public Schools, Johnston
South Carolina	Betty T. Bagley	Anderson School District 5, Anderson
South Dakota	Larry Johnke	Irene-Wakonda School District 13-3, Irene
Tennessee	Roy M. Dalton	Maryville City Schools, Maryville
Texas	Roel A. Gonzalez	Rio Grande City Consolidated ISD, Rio Grande City
Utah	Vernon M. Henshaw	Alpine School District, American Fork
Vermont	Brenda L. Needham	Windsor School District, Windsor
Virginia	Donald J. Ford	Harrisonburg City Public Schools, Harrisonburg
Washington	Linda Byrnes	Arlington School District 16, Arlington
West Virginia	James B. Phares	Marion County Schools, Fairmont
Wisconsin	James R. Rickabaugh	Whitefish Bay School District, Whitefish Bay
Wyoming	James R. Lowham	Natrona County School District #1, Casper
AAIE	Harlan E. Lyso	Seoul Foreign School, Seoul





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