



Eugene White was the second African-American to serve as president of AASA, leading the organization in 2006-07. A superintendent for almost two decades, first in Indiana's Washington Township and then in the Indianapolis Public Schools, he served on the Executive Committee during a period of tremendous transition for the organization.

After a four-decade career in education, White left Indianapolis in June 2013, but "flunked retirement" and now serves as president of Martin University, a small liberal arts private college on the east side of Indianapolis.

White talked with freelance writer Glenn Cook about his experiences as a minority superintendent, as well as his work with AASA, as part of the organization's 150th anniversary coverage. Here are excerpts from the interview.

You went to college in Alabama, but have spent your entire education career in Indiana. Tell me how you moved into administration.

"I played basketball and baseball at Alabama A&M, and left the school with all of the scoring records in basketball. I thought I knew something about basketball, and I wanted to be a head varsity basketball coach. I came to Fort Wayne, Ind., with the intentions of winning a state championship, and I had some success with my teams in eighth and ninth grade.

"This was during the early 1970s, and at the time there were very few African-American administrators in Fort Wayne. They were recruiting me to be an administrator because I was having success as a coach. I hesitated at first, but then after five years, I decided to go into administration.

"I ended up becoming the first African-American high school principal in the Fort Wayne Community Schools, which was the second largest district in Indiana at the time, and then I moved to Indianapolis and became the principal of the largest high school in the state."

After two years as a principal and then another year as a deputy superintendent in Indianapolis, you moved into the superintendency in Washington Township, where you stayed for 11 years. It was during this time you became more heavily involved in AASA, correct?

"I'd been involved in AASA for a while. You've got to understand, in the old days when you were going through grad school to obtain your superintendent certification and degrees, part of the tradition was that you'd become a member

of the national organization, and that organization for me was AASA. That's just how it was.

"I didn't consider the number of minorities or what have you who were involved in the organization. I wanted to be the best professional educator I could be. I wanted to network and connect with my colleagues from around the country. I knew that associating with other professionals like myself at the national level would be a great thing to do."

You were active in your state association, and served as Indiana's president around the time that Ben Canada became the first African-American superintendent to lead AASA. Tell me how his presidency affected you and your work.

"In the days of Ben Canada, things were so, so political and segmented. The types of campaigns they ran looked like you were running for President of the United States, not president of AASA. I was so proud of him and the way he led the organization. He was very pragmatic and thoughtful, and he knew how to navigate the system. I did not think about running on the national level until I got to the Executive Committee, and I don't think it would have happened if Ben Canada had not been a great president.

"In any political situation, you are going to face some challenges and obstructions, but if your heart is in the right place and you're doing it for the right reasons, I believe you can get support, and that's what Ben did. In my case, I was lucky. I did not have to run on a national platform like Ben and others before him did. When I ran the separations were not as great. And it helped that I was from an area of the country where AASA has its largest percentage of members."

You were part of the Executive Committee during a time of tremendous transition for AASA. The organization changed its governance structure, moving to a smaller 22-member Executive Committee that has regional members elected from the Governing Board. (The committee now oversees policy implementation and develops AASA's resolutions and legislative agenda.) How has that change affected the organization?

"It really has expanded the role of governance in the organization. The structure provides an opportunity for a broader representation of AASA's membership to bring their perspectives to the governance process. As our organization gets leaner at the staff level, it allows us to be more strategic, flexible and adaptable to the challenges we face, so that we're more organized to deal with future changes."

This period was when AASA decided to take on the No Child Left Behind Act and also when you became the first organization to return to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Why do you think such bold stances were necessary?

“We were going through a period in which we were looking at things in different ways. With NCLB, when professional organizations and educators in general were left out of the process and Washington decided it was going to fix the situation for us, that hit home. We decided that we had to take a stand on behalf of superintendents and school districts across this country, and we did. It was not a popular stand, but it was the right one.

“The same thing is true for New Orleans. “We were one of the first professional organizations to return after that storm and we did it because we wanted to make a statement about our profession. We wanted to help Louisiana and New Orleans rebuild.”

As you were leaving the board, Paul Houston retired and Dan Domenech was brought in as executive director. How do you think Dan has positioned AASA for the future?

“I think the timing was good for Dan to come in, because he has a different way of looking at things. The organization is leaner now. It’s more strategic, flexible, and adaptable to the challenges that AASA and the profession face. I’m certain these transitions will continue as the profession continues to be impacted by politics and technology, but I think it can still be relevant and valuable to educational leaders in the future.”

One disturbing trend that remains is the lack of minorities working as superintendents in the nation’s public school districts. Why hasn’t this grown more?

“The pool of minority administrators is continuing to get smaller. It’s always been a select, small group for many many years, but now younger administrators see how tough it is to be a superintendent, and they don’t want any part of it. When you do a break down of dollars and cents and the time it takes away from families, you can see why.

“When I became superintendent in Washington Township, there were only four African-American superintendents in the state of Indiana. I was kind of obsessed with the profession. I wanted to be the best I could be, and my family suffered because I was off pursuing my education and doctorate. Many of the younger administrators I talk to are not attracted to the false glamour of being the one in charge. For minority candidates, that’s doubly so. And you just don’t have the kind of interest you once had.

“But strange things happen. I never thought a little boy from Alabama would end up being in the positions I’ve been in over the years. I look back at it and think about all of the things that happened, and I still have to pinch myself. I still think I could be a better basketball coach for the state of Indiana.”