



Paul Houston served as AASA’s executive director from 1993 to 2008, leading the organization through a tumultuous time that saw Congress increase its role and authority over local schools, national disasters such as 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, and a move by administrators toward more job specific training.

At the same time, Houston’s take-no-prisoners attitude — especially around the No Child Left Behind Act — helped broaden AASA’s presence in the national media. A prolific writer and public speaker, his interest in bringing a more thoughtful leadership style to the profession was acclaimed as well.

Now enjoying retirement, Houston still writes and continues to not shy away from his opinions. He spoke with freelance writer Glenn Cook for AASA’s 150th anniversary coverage.

When you took over as executive director in 1994, you had just written the book, *Exploding the Myths*, and you seemed determined to take on education critics who said K-12 schools were doing a poor job. Shortly after you were hired, you went out on a 17-day media tour that seemed to get people’s attention.

“I thought the attacks on education were misplaced and wrong. It was pretty clear when I went to AASA that superintendents needed a stronger national voice than they were having. Superintendents were being attacked and there wasn’t enough push back taking place, so I used this as an opportunity to say the things I wanted about education and hopefully revitalize the organization at the same time.

“I’m one of those strange people that likes working with and interacting with the media and reporters. I look at it as sort of an intellectual ping-pong. Looking back, I think we were right about what the challenge was. What we didn’t not know at the time was how difficult it would be to fix it.”

What did you bring AASA that was different from your predecessors?

“Thought leadership. I wanted to bring some pretty provocative thinking about how superintendents could do their jobs in different ways. I wanted them to see their jobs in a more positive way, and I wanted to bring new ideas and new speakers in to stimulate them and make them think in a different way.

“There was a real ongoing effort, from working on a code of ethics in the 1970s to developing standards for the superintendency in the 1980s and early ‘90s, to

define the profession and raise the recognition that these are critical positions. The next step, as far as I was concerned, was to look for new ways and ideas to stimulate the superintendents, to have them see their jobs and their work in a more positive and different way.”

You joined AASA in 1970. How have you seen the organization, as well as other national education groups, evolve over those 45 years?

“Associations, particularly education associations at the national level, are struggling. People are not joiners like they used to be. When I was getting my administrator training in the 1970s, I was told I had to join and that I had to participate. It was automatic. There weren’t any other meetings. AASA had the only national meeting. You didn’t have state associations, so the organization was able to serve a much broader swath of the administrative structure.

“What’s interesting is that we gave birth to and nurtured the state associations, and in doing so AASA essentially cannibalized itself. As the state associations got bigger and bigger, they started competing with the organization and the things it was doing. A perfect example of that was NASE (the National Academy of School Executives). With NASE, the states said, ‘We can do that and we can make money doing it ourselves.’ The irony was, the more successful we were in helping our states, we were weakening ourselves as a national organization.

“Now, with the Internet and technology and the push to move training to the local level, it’s very different for national organizations. And joining just to be part of something is not automatic anymore.”

AASA’s strident opposition to No Child Left Behind is one of the defining moments of your tenure. Describe that time and how it felt.

“Taking NCLB on first and initially as the only organization to oppose it was a pretty tough decision because the Bush administration was pretty vindictive in their response. They did a number of things, including trying to get me fired. But we took a tough stance and stayed there because it was the right thing, in my opinion, to do.

“Bruce Hunter did an excellent job of lobbying on behalf of our members, who thought — rightfully so — that the law would hurt public education. We were right, no matter how much it may have hurt us at the time. And as a result, we got to be known as an organization that would do the right thing regardless of cost.”

You did the same thing when you decided to hold the national conference in New Orleans just 18 months after Hurricane Katrina.

“We did. It was a difficult time for us financially, but it was the right thing to do. The moral thing to do. And if you look back at my tenure, that’s what I tried to bring to the membership. Support the members by provoking them to stop the attacks on their position and at the same time, provoking them to do a better job. Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comforted, if you will.”

Why did you decide to retire?

“We had been through so many ups and downs financially. The business factor started looming larger and larger in terms of how would we pay the bills. I had already gone through this when I started. We were almost broke when I went there. And after the economy started to go south again, like it did after 9/11 when we were forced to do the first of two cycles of restructuring. It looked like we were going to have to go through a third, and I decided it was a good time to move on.”

What else are you proud of from your AASA tenure?

“AASA has had an inordinate amount of influence in Washington. When we were trying to lobby Congress, if we could get 200 superintendents to hit the Hill, that was powerful. I was always telling our members, ‘Superintendents are community leaders with great influence back home, and you have a bully pulpit in your community. Politicians have to pay attention to that.’

“Everything old becomes new at some point in an educator’s career, and that’s why you see these issues coming back again and again. The key for me, and I think our history supports this, is that the association’s policies and practices should be based on whether we are doing what’s right for kids.”

“In 1996, we were the first education organization to join with the Children’s Defense Fund’s ‘Stand Up for America’s Children.’ A year or two before that, Marian Wright Edelman was highly critical of superintendents, but we were able to transform her perspective in a way that other organizations had not done.

“We were both praised and criticized by the far right and the far left on the same day, and it’s because we took a position and stood by it. As an organization, we said there are things children can’t do for themselves, and we as adults must step in and help them.”

Looking at your successor and the challenges he has faced in the role, what do you think about the work that is going on now, as AASA embarks on its next 150 years?

“Dan has more of a business orientation than I do. And he’s really getting them to focus on the profession and on what it is to be a superintendent. He’s also

focusing on helping superintendents to connect to each other in ways that we did at some points, but not as well as we could at others.

“As for the organization itself, it has to focus on lobbying and providing a national voice. You can’t try to compete with the states on professional development, because whoever is closest to the customers will win. AASA always has done a good job of providing a national voice at the federal level and in the media for the profession. That’s where it has to be.”

What would you say to new superintendents who are considering joining AASA or attending a national conference?

“The connections you make at an AASA meeting are very powerful, in part because the people we represent are lonely. They make the Maytag repairman look like a party animal. They are the only one in the community who does that job, and they have an entirely different perspective. AASA says you don’t have to be alone. There are a lot of people out there just like you, and by connecting to people at meetings and through committees, you have an opportunity to share and get comfort from each other.

“That’s something the new breed of superintendent is missing out on. Dan’s challenge, and AASA’s challenge, is to find ways to show them what they’re missing. And I think they can do that.”