



**Walt Whitfield** was superintendent in Decatur, Ill., when he became executive director of the Illinois Association of School Administrators in 1991. He remained in the post for five years, then became a scholar in residence at the University of Illinois, where he remained until his retirement in 2012.

Whitfield discussed the evolution and growth of the state associations that occurred in the early 1990s with freelance writer Glenn Cook as part of AASA's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary coverage.

**Describe the relationship between the state association and AASA when you took over as executive director.**

“It was fairly mature. And it wasn't long before Paul Houston came in as the new executive director. He opened the door to build upon what we had done in the past, and our activity with the national association was stepped up, especially in the political and legislative endeavors because Paul and Bruce Hunter helped us realize that was a major arena we needed to be involved in.”

**During your time in Illinois, professional development for superintendents really grew at the state level. Why do you think this took place?**

“The national conference was really hard hitting. You had nationally and internationally known people inside and outside education who were serving as speakers. But when it came down to the day-to-day needs of superintendents, AASA wasn't able to meet the needs of the 50 state organizations that are out there. It became impossible, because the needs are similar but they're not the same.

“Most of the action, the day-to-day hard hitting stuff, is done at the state level. The state legislatures are still getting into the nuts and bolts of what is done at the local level, whether it is in curriculum, instruction, or technology. There is so much pressure on the superintendent that the support system on a day-to-day basis is the state association, not AASA. That's not AASA's fault. It's just a fact.

“Paul saw this, and that's when the professional development program started expanding at the state level with AASA's assistance in doing so. We looked at AASA as the big brother, and most of the state organizations got moral support, technical support, and financial support. AASA did as much as it could to provide whenever we asked for something.

“We were different than many states in that, while our participation in focused staff development grew at the state level, it didn’t drop off at the national level. Illinois always has believed in participating in national activities, and we had 900 superintendents and 300 to 400 executive level members.”

**What is AASA’s most important service?**

“The most important thing they do now is not necessarily a high profile activity. They provide an enormous amount of support and resources to their members and their state associations through the executive directors and the other committee structures they have. And much of that is extremely important.

**An informed membership is a powerful one, especially given that politics still are rooted at the local level.**

“Exactly. Think about how the political process works. When I was a district superintendent in Decatur, I had weekly contact with our local state senator. When I didn’t call the senator about legislation that would affect our school district, she would call me. When I became the executive director of the state association, I moved out of the legislative district. I could get into see the governor, or the House or Senate majority leader, but I could not reach her because I no longer lived in the district.

“When I was with IASA, I always took the position that, even though we don’t control a lot of votes or contribute a lot of money in comparison to other organizations, our strength is in the relationships our members have developed with legislators. They know we’ll provide them with timely, accurate, non-slanted information about what legislation will do to our district or to our state.

“State and national legislators are not that concerned what AASA or IASA thinks, but if 10 superintendents contact them, they pay attention. When the state and national association provides information to the local superintendent, who in turn contacts legislators, that’s really powerful stuff. Superintendents could not do that as effectively if they didn’t have that support from AASA and the state associations. That’s where AASA continues to make the biggest impact.”