



Fenwick English, a superintendent in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., in the mid 1970s, was recruited by then-Executive Director Paul Salmon to run AASA’s National Center for the Improvement of Learning in 1977. He left the association in 1979, but continued to work with the National Academy of School Executives (NASE) as well as on curriculum audits.

A professor of educational administration for three decades, English now works at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He spoke with freelance writer Glenn Cook as part of AASA’s 150th anniversary coverage.

Describe what it was like to be an AASA member during the years when you were an administrator.

“AASA’s conference was the one that anybody who was a superintendent went to. You would ride the train to Atlantic City every year and become part of this huge community of school administrators. We used to call it the great trading area. It was where superintendents were interviewed by school boards. Right there on site. It’s not like it is today.

“For any business manager in the country, it was the one place where you could go and see virtually everything you could possibly buy, from buses to air conditioning. Business managers used to go to the conferences and just stay on the exhibit floor, making out their lists. It was the only game in town.”

You came to AASA during a time of great expansion for the association. NASE was huge, and it was during this period that you saw the start of the American Association of Educational Service Agencies, the I Care Conference and the Partners Program. It must have been an exciting time, especially given that you were tasked with helping to create the National Center for the Improvement of Learning.

“It was a very exciting time. AASA had started NASE and they were starting to focus more on curriculum and instruction. I had worked with NASE on the curriculum, so they recruited me, and we started holding conferences, first in Minneapolis and then in Denver.

“Out of everything they did, I think NASE had a huge impact. It was hugely successful. It’s been copied by so many others out there because it really was the forerunner of really intensive staff development. Up to that point, superintendents concentrated on budgets and collective bargaining. With NASE, you had programs that went a week. To have a weeklong conference of some

intensity that was focused on school leadership, that was huge. A lot of superintendents went through that program.”

You left AASA after two years to become a partner in Pete Howard Mitchell (now KPMG), but you continued to work with the association on the curriculum audits and then as a NASE distinguished professor. Given its success, why isn't NASE still in operation?

“Really it comes down to competition. Everything is splintered and specialized, and there's no more one-size-fits-all training. You've got to remember, NASE was around at a time when there was no National Staff Development Council, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals wasn't doing the type of intensive staff development that it does now. It became a business decision not to continue it.”

AASA has evolved greatly as an association over the past 150 years, and now it is a much smaller organization than when you were a superintendent. As professional development and training become more state-specific, do you think there is a lasting future for these types of organizations at the national level.

“Yes, but it's definitely smaller. If you draw 5,000 to a conference now, that's huge. It would have been considered a huge failure when I was there. But you have to consider how the profession of educational leadership has evolved. Superintendents have many more options today than they had. I don't think it is as tight a network as it used to be, at least nationally.

“It's a transitional time for all of the educational associations. The rise of the neoconservative think tanks positioning educational associations as quote, “the establishment,” has been a factor in marginalizing groups in the Washington, D.C. area. That's why advocacy is so important for AASA's members to embrace. The whole dynamic is shifting, and superintendents still need to show they have a voice at the national level.”