



**Daniel Domenech**, AASA’s executive director since 2008, is a native of Cuba who became a superintendent at age 32. After 20 years in districts on Long Island, he moved to Virginia’s Fairfax County Public Schools, where he was superintendent of the nation’s 10<sup>th</sup> largest district for seven years. He also was a senior vice president for urban markets for McGraw-Hill Education before moving into the AASA position.

Domenech, the first and only Latino to serve as AASA’s president, participated in a candid conversation with freelance writer Glenn Cook as part of coverage for the association’s 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. He discussed how AASA has evolved, the challenges of bringing more diversity to the profession, the association’s advocacy role, and its plans for the future.

**During your tenure, you’ve rebranded AASA as the “The School Superintendents Association.” What was the reason for that decision?**

“Our mission is really about advocacy. Secondary to our mission is professional development. But first and foremost, we are advocates and thought leaders on behalf of the children we serve. Superintendents are the voice of the children in the community that have no voice, and the one thing we can do that no one else can is be the voice for the superintendent at the national level. We are the national advocates for the profession.

“We are advocates on behalf of the children we serve, advocates and thought leaders. That’s where we need to play a leadership role as an association and where we need to lead the discussion. It is crucial.”

**You’ve been an AASA member for almost 40 years. How has the organization evolved over that time?**

“When I became a superintendent, I couldn’t wait to join AASA. Now when someone becomes a superintendent, you have to beg them to join. There’s not that same loyalty and feeling that this is something I can’t wait to be part of. It’s a whole different generation. A whole different dynamic. Today’s superintendents are not joiners. There’s not that loyalty to a single organization that there was.

“There are reasons for that. In my days, there was less competition. The state associations weren’t as developed as they are today. You didn’t have ASCD or the principals’ organizations offering intensive staff development. AASA was the only game in town.”

**What happened?**

“Over time, the opportunities for an AASA member diminished. The number of workshops and seminars that were done on a regular basis for members declined, and the committee structures changed. The opportunities for superintendents to meet regularly were not there any more and the opportunities for members to become engaged disappeared.”

**How has education evolved during that same time? What changes still need to be made?**

“Teaching unfortunately has not evolved enough. That’s not so much the fault of the profession as it is the fault of the structure. We are still functioning in an industrial model for education using 21<sup>st</sup> century tools. With all of the technology that’s available, we still have teachers in the classroom teaching the same way their ancestors did 100 years ago, and until we get away from that model we won’t fundamentally change how we educate our children.

“You don’t need to have all of the sixth graders together in one group, the seventh graders in another group and the eighth graders in a third group. That’s why education reform as we see it now doesn’t work. It keeps trying to take us back to where we were 100 years ago.

“Funding has to change as well. The way we fund education today is a recipe for the achievement gap we have. It doesn’t work because it is to heavily based on the local, state, federal model. It focuses on the system, not the child.

“My vision of what education can be and should be — it can be now in fact — is focusing on the individual child. We have the ability to do that. We’re only prevented from doing so by how we’re organized. Everybody is being dealt with and treated like they’re able to grow at the same ability level. We should let them do so at their own pace. It will take some kids 14 or 15 years to get out of high school and some it will take 10. That’s how you ‘reform’ education.”

**Over time, AASA has taken some strong stances against more federal involvement in education, especially around the No Child Left Behind Act and initiatives such as Race to the Top. What do you think of those stances?**

“On NCLB, I think the organization was standing up and accurately representing where the members were at. That’s how the superintendents felt about it. We’re doing a similar thing with the current administration. We’ve been outspoken and critical of Race to the Top and robbing from Peter to pay Paul for all of these competitive grants. We’ve taken a very hard line there, and it’s what our

members want. They don't want us to make them believe that everything is great when it isn't. If it was, then our advocacy would be a sham."

**But you support the Common Core, correct?**

"I do, personally. I think it's a step in the right direction because we'll know and have a standard for each child, not as a group but as an individual."

**Do you see the political polarization in Congress easing anytime soon and having an effect on K-12 education?**

"We're going to have to see what happens in 2016. The paralysis in Congress has led to the most active administration that we may have ever had. They've allowed the president to call the shots on everything with regard to education. The issues we've had with the Department of Education has come because the Department of Education can do as it pleases because Congress is not part of the game any more. Until that changes and until we have a Congress that has the ability to work together and pass legislation, it will remain that way."

**Despite the U.S. becoming a majority-minority population, school administrators tend to be overwhelmingly white and male. What needs to happen so that administrators are more representative of the students they serve?**

"We can be proud of what's happened with women superintendents. Before I came to AASA, we had only one woman who was president, and in the time I've been executive director we've had three. Now one in four superintendents is a woman, so we've made progress there.

"I wish we could say the same about Latinos and African Americans. We are now a minority-majority school system in America, and the fact that only 4 percent of our superintendents are Latino or African-American means we are woefully underrepresenting children in our schools.

"The change in the makeup of the superintendency has been incremental, and the way to make changes is through recruiting and preparation. We already have a narrow pipeline. Over 50 percent of black and Latino kids don't graduate from high school, and of the 50 percent that do, only 12.5 percent graduate from college. Of those 12.5 percent, do they really want to go into teaching, where the pay is dismal, where they're in an environment where they are chastised and accused of being at the bottom of the barrel?

"As a result, we're not getting the number of minorities into the teaching profession that we need to have, and that means we have a smaller group of

minorities who are principals and an even smaller group that are superintendents. That has to change, and helping that rise remains one of my lasting targets.”

**In addition to advocacy, what types of services do you feel AASA can provide to its members to increase the engagement that is so critical to its future?**

“We want to be known as the organization that trains current and future school leaders, and we want our members to be engaged in our programs. Today, we have the National Superintendent Certification Program, which is in its third year and has more than 80 emerging leaders on board. We are giving them opportunities to meet regularly, work with mentors, and find ways to solve problems they all face.

“We are creating other subcategories that allow groups of superintendents to come together on a regular basis. We have a 16 county consortium. We’ve created a collaborative of 30 small sized districts that face similar issues. We have a digital consortium. As we form these groups, we’re seeing the enthusiasm about our organization returning.

“At this point I’m seeing the most membership engagement we’ve had in years. Our members want to be engaged. They want to come together, not just once a year or by learning online. They enjoy the collegiality of this organization.”

“We’ve been here 150 years, and it hasn’t been easy, We’ve had our bumps and challenges along the way, but we’re not going anywhere. This organization will be here for a long, long time.”