



Gene Carter was AASA’s first National Superintendent of the Year, winning the honor in 1988 while superintendent of Virginia’s Norfolk Public Schools. Carter was a teacher, building level and central office administrator in Norfolk before becoming the district’s first African-American superintendent in 1983. After nine years in the position, he became executive director of ASCD and led that organization for more than two decades until his retirement in 2014.

Carter talked about his experiences with freelance writer Glenn Cook as part of AASA’s coverage of its 150th anniversary. Here are excerpts from the interview.

You became superintendent at a time when Norfolk was starting to move away from the segregation era. Describe what that era was like, and the pressure you were under to be successful in a district with large achievement gaps between white and non-white students.

“At the time, Norfolk was all black schools and all white schools, and it was pretty much driven by a community assignment orientation that was somewhat contradictory. Students were pretty much assigned to communities, and the communities for all intents and purposes were segregated. Among minorities, academic performance was very low and the dropout rate was very, very high. It was also an era in which there were heightened expectations, both from the community and the courts, that student performance needed to be more equalized.

“When I became superintendent, nationally there were very few African-American superintendents in either medium-sized or large urban districts. The challenge that I faced was to right the ship, so to speak, and to do it sooner rather than later. I wasn’t the exception. Most of the other minority superintendents at that time, minority or female, were faced with similar circumstances.”

The programs you helped implement, such as a closing the gap initiative and the development of a foundation that guaranteed every graduate would have a chance to go to college, were hugely successful. What contributed to that success?

“We set out aggressively to tackle the issues we faced in the district, and we determined the only way we could improve the education system was to reach out and engage the broader community. We developed magnet schools. We had multiple partnerships within the private sector. We tried to expand the students’ reach beyond the high school diploma by restructuring the secondary education program to include more tutorials, assistance from counselors in the selection of

courses, and the development of summer work opportunities. All of those initiatives played a significant role in what we were able to accomplish.”

What it was like to be named the first National Superintendent of the Year?

“I’d been a member of AASA well before the honor, and I was encouraged by my colleagues to submit my application. It was a rigorous application to say the least, but I felt comfortable in my sense of competitiveness, if you will, because of what we had accomplished in Norfolk. It was a pleasant surprise to be chosen, and I was obviously gratified, but it was the team of people in the school district that made it possible.”

Today, less than 10 percent of superintendents are minorities. Given the shifting demographics of our students population, do you find this disturbing?

“When you look at the representation of minorities in higher leadership positions, it’s troubling. In many, many instances when minorities are selected it’s when things have gotten so very, very bad that it takes almost a miracle to address the plethora of problems and bring about meaningful change. I think it’s a reflection on what’s occurring within our nation. Our demographics are changing and our responsiveness to those changes is not as strong as think it ought to be.

You have worked very closely with AASA over the years. How have you seen the organization evolve?

“Early in my career, AASA was more representative of suburban and small districts and was less so in large urban communities. It’s range of programs, products and services were geared to that constituency, and the focus was pretty much on budgets, buses and buildings as opposed to the broad swath of things today.

“As time passed, it required a massive transformation, if you will, in the association. As the range of its leadership constituencies increased in the urban arena, AASA represented that leadership and took on their challenges. It was successful in making the transformation while not losing sight of its other members.

“Remember, during this time there was not the same heightened focus as it relates to student performance, as it relates to the preparation of students for the broader world than what was perceived at the at point. As AASA has evolved, it has become more whole in its thrust, and the leadership has placed a great deal more interest on students and personalized instruction and the needs that are there.”

“I think there continues to be a distinctive role for an association like AASA. It has played an ever-increasing, powerful change agent role through its advocacy and influence. It has addressed, head on, the barriers to implementing fundamental changes in education. It’s not about fixing parts of the system, but about whole system transformation. That’s worthy of noting, and it is taking place at the local, state, regional and national levels where lots of work needs to take place. I deeply appreciate their work in that arena.”