



Burke Royster, superintendent of Greenville County Schools in South Carolina, has been immersed in AASA since he was a child. His father, Bill, was a former AASA president and 16-year superintendent who led the Anderston School District 5 through a “peaceful desegregation” in the mid 1970s.

Royster followed his parents — his mother was an elementary school teacher — into education. He has worked as a teacher, coach, assistant principal, assistant principal, assistant superintendent and deputy superintendent before taking over as superintendent in Greenville County in 2011.

He spoke with freelance writer Glenn Cook as part of AASA’s coverage of its 150th anniversary. Here are excerpts from the interview.

AASA has had a huge presence in the life of your family. Can you describe what the organization has meant to you?

“It is intertwined in every part of my personal and professional life. AASA does a great job of representing and bringing together superintendents and district leaders. It sets the mark for being a professional organization.

“I have an unusual perspective, one that’s different that others have, because I’ve gotten to be around and hear from the people who are the leaders at the highest levels and at the most prominent systems in the nation since I was young. It helped me in shaping my opinions and developing the skills that I have.

“My dad was very close to Paul Salmon, Rich Miller, Gail Bartow, Earl Ferguson and Norm Hall, among others. I had the opportunity to be around those people, to interact with them on an informal basis, to learn how they approach issues around leadership, to hear about their philosophy of leadership. The insights they offered were very helpful to me, and I still call back on the things they said in my job today.”

Let’s talk about education in your state. How has it evolved since your father was a superintendent?

“My dad worked in Anderson School District 5, which is in the western corner of the state bordering Georgia. And it’s about the size of the four neighboring schools districts put together, with about 15,000 students at the time. He was faced with the challenge of leading the district as it voluntarily desegregated, and it was the first large system in the state to do so. It was a difficult time, but he managed to do it, and our state is better for it.

“When I moved into administration, we started seeing more work being done at the state level for administrators. South Carolina has an association that serves superintendents, principals, central office personnel and student services administrators under one umbrella. That sends a strong, unified message to our legislature. They agree most of the time, especially on the bigger issues and that is helpful.”

Because so much work in education is focused on the local and state level, is there a benefit to being part of a national organization like AASA?

“Oh, yes. Certainly. It’s a challenging time for public education, not just in South Carolina but nationally as well. And we need to have that united front as opportunities present themselves on the national level. Administrators need to find common ground so we can work together on those things.

“Of course, there is more impetus to do this type of work at the state level, because that’s where more of the regulations come from, and we have more in common because we’re operating under the same set of parameters. At the same time, I think it’s shortsighted to just focus on what’s going on just in your state. There is so much to be learned by broadening your horizons. Whether you’re in North Carolina, North Dakota, New Hampshire or California, you have more common challenges than unique ones.

“As a superintendent, one thing I struggle with is encouraging our folks to develop their own networks outside the district and outside the state. We have 87 principals, and they’re more inclined to develop professional relationships inside the district because of the common ground they operate under. That’s dangerous, because they can get a bit of tunnel vision, and it’s very important to develop outside relationships.”

What do you think are the biggest challenges facing AASA and other national organizations?

“I understand why AASA focuses on the superintendent, and there are things that are unique to this role, but everything I do in this district is working together as a team. I wish, and hope, that AASA will find ways to be more inclusive of people other than superintendents to be part of the organization.

“Within our leadership team, I have an obligation to bring our administrators along using the various leadership development opportunities that are out there, whether it is at the state level or through a national organization. The pipeline is getting thinner, all along the line in education, because of the great challenges that we face. There are fewer individuals seeking those opportunities, so we

need to do everything we can to expose more people to the position and the realities of the job, both positive and negative.”