

Tom Shannon and Anne Bryant led the National School Boards Association for a combined 35 years from 1977 to 2012, a period in which more and more attention has been paid to the relationship between superintendents and the elected/appointed boards that hire them.

Here are reflections from Shannon, whose relationship dates with AASA to his time as a general counsel in the 1960s, and Bryant, who was NSBA's executive director from 1996 until 2012. Glenn Cook, a freelance writer and former NSBA staff member, interviewed them separately for the 150th anniversary edition of *School Administrator*. Here are some highlights from the interviews.

Tom Shannon

Your relationship with AASA dates back more than 50 years. Tell me how you became involved with the organization.

Paul Salmon was a mentor of mine and a very good friend. We were like brothers. I was chief deputy superintendent and general counsel for the San Diego schools at the time and he used to call me regularly with legal questions. Finally we made it formal and I was put on contract, and I did that for several years until I became executive director at NSBA.

Promoting improved board and superintendent relations became a focus during your tenure at NSBA. Why did you think that was important at the time?

When I came to NSBA, Paul and I made an agreement that I would talk with him at every AASA convention on the subject of board superintendent relations, and he would come to our show as well. Before long, we were putting on these programs in Washington and nationally. We also would go and do a lot of dog-and-pony shows where we'd be called in by a board and superintendent to help them solve practical problems.

What was working with Paul Salmon at that level like?

He had a clear-minded approach. He knew the position of the board as the governing body and the position of the superintendent as the chief executive officer of the school district. He was very true to that understanding. He was a classic administrator because he knew exactly where the line was and he never crossed it. He never tried to dominate the board and knew the final decision was always up to them.

Paul was a helluva guy and a wonderful man. He believed strongly that superintendents should work well with school boards and vice versa. I took care of the vice versa part.

Anne Bryant

One of the most enjoyable parts of the NSBA conference always was the duet, or duel, between you and AASA's executive directors (Paul Houston and Daniel Domenech). What are your memories of those sessions?

When I first came to NSBA, I reached out to Paul. We had a very good working relationship, and that showed when we appeared at each other's conferences. We ended up having some pretty hard hitting discussions about issues no one talks about between board members and superintendents, and I think everyone learned a great deal from them. It's something I was proud of and that Dan has carried on.

The first big AASA-NSBA partnership of your tenure was on the development of the Key Work of School Boards. Why do you think that was significant?

The Key Work was an intensive look at how to redefine the board's role and take it to a new level of complexity where you focus on student achievement instead of the pure governance role. I will never forget the number of superintendents who came up to us and said, "What is this? I'm not sure about this." The thing was, when you add to the board's focus the notion of increasing student achievement, that's when it becomes complicated.

Paul called me and was quite alarmed, but when we discussed how the Key Work would provide clarity about the board's work, he made a commitment to help us on it. The Key Work team ended up meeting with the 10-12 best superintendents in the country, and we published a joint paper on the role of the superintendent and the role of the board. I think that was good for both of our organizations.

During your tenure, AASA and NSBA were two of the founders and strongest supporters of the Learning First Alliance, a partnership of leading education organizations dedicated to improving student learning in America's public schools. Why is this organization important to K-12 education?

AASA and NSBA worked hard to formulate LFA and to bring these very diverse groups together. Their focus on reading put them on the map and has had some very positive impacts on the field. But what is most important is that by working with unions and principals and other education groups, we've been able to have some very good conversations and discuss strategies behind closed doors that have informed us and made us better. Any time you can get groups breaking bread together, sharing problems and being more collaborative, that's healthy. It's a healthy phenomenon.