



Newsmaker: Beverly Hall

2009 National Superintendent of the Year

Beverly Hall is pictured at left and with the sponsors of the Superintendent of the Year program. As the 2009 honoree, Hall is entitled to present a \$10,000 college scholarship to a student at the all-girls high school in Jamaica from which she graduated before emigrating with her family to New York City. Pictured from left are: Dennis Maple, president of ARAMARK Education; Randy Collins, president of AASA; Hall; Darlene Pierce, director of the National Superintendent of the Year program; Dan Hanlon of ING; and Dan Domenech, executive director of AASA.

The last few years have been good to Atlanta Public Schools. Standardized test scores are rising. Aging schools have been renovated. And, last year, nearly three of four schools in the city met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals.

A good deal of credit for this goes to Superintendent Beverly Hall, who has provided the district with almost a decade of stable but dynamic leadership. Her efforts to improve teacher quality, build a strong administrative team, and strengthen the elementary school program are pushing Atlanta toward her promise of becoming a world-class school system.

So it was well-deserved recognition when Hall was named as the American Association of School Administrators 2009 National Superintendent of the Year. She is the 22nd superintendent to win the honor, which is cosponsored by Aramark Education and ING.

But, the fact is, Hall has made a difference in urban schools for decades. As a New York City principal, she helped turn around several troubled schools before being promoted to deputy chancellor for instruction and later superintendent of one of the city's "community school districts." She later spent four years as the state-appointed superintendent in Newark, N.J., before her 1999 arrival in Atlanta.

Recently, *ASBJ* Senior Editor Del Stover asked Hall to talk about lessons learned during her career—and about her ideas for making urban schools successful. Here's what she had to say:

Some people say we should accept that some students aren't going to succeed academically. You've argued otherwise. What has happened in your career that makes you believe all students can learn?

I was selected to open a junior high school program in New York City. The program was designed to serve children who were coming from two housing projects in Brooklyn. Those

children came from very challenging environments.

We had very high expectations for those students. We worked very hard with them. We told them, "You guys are going to work really hard, and we're going to teach as much as we can, and we're going to get you ready for those specialized high schools ... that require a rigorous applications process. Of the first 100 graduates, 88 were accepted into some of New York's most prestigious high schools.

When you believe in children, when you have high standards, and when you have teachers and staff who really believe that education is the great equalizer, students can be taught to high standards and go on to be highly successful. I knew that, but that [experience] was a moment of truth for me.

What was one important lesson you learned during your early career that's helped you be successful as a superintendent?

I went on to become principal of a poor-performing elementary school ... and then a big traditional junior high school that we were able to successfully transform.

What do you think is the most important thing that superintendents and school boards can do to see their troubled schools improve?

The research is very clear. You have to have, in every school, very good leadership, and you have to have quality teaching. Therefore, boards of education and superintendents really have to work to provide the conditions and resources so you will have those two things present.

You have to have good recruitment. You have to look at your compensation. But more importantly, you have to provide ongoing professional development for both principals and teachers. This professional development should be high quality. And there should be accountability—from the school board to superintendent to principal to teacher—for results.

You've voiced your support for the idea of national standards. Why do you think this would make any difference in public education?

We know what international standards look like. We should be benchmarking our nation's standards against international standards. At the end of the day, when children graduate, they're going to have to compete in a globally competitive world.

When we're teaching teaching in Georgia or teaching in New York or in California, we need to know those standards are comparable, that our assessments to measure students are of rigor so that when students do well, we know we are preparing them for college-level work and success.

As long as you have states with a variety of standards, there's a question mark that, if you're doing well in Georgia, you would do well if you moved somewhere else.

You've spoken about the importance of good leadership in Atlanta's academic gains. What have you done during your tenure to improve the quality of administrators?

Eighty-nine percent of our principals are new since my arrival in 1999. We put in place a very strong accountability system where principals know at the start of the year what targets they have to meet in terms of improvements in reading, math, student attendance, and other factors. If a school meets 70 percent of these targets, everyone in the school gets additional compensation.

But a lot of principals decided they didn't have the will or the commitment or the skill sets to meet those marks. Or they had the years to take retirement or they felt it was time to go. Some of them moved on. So we were able to recruit people who we felt were willing to take on the challenge.

But, in addition to recruiting [these principals], we invested heavily in professional development. We also formed an academy to train future principals, and out of that group, 30 percent have so far been placed as principals. We're growing our own—and supporting the ones we have.

Everyone is talking these days about "teacher quality." What are you, as head of the Atlanta schools, doing to see that the best teachers work in your classrooms?

It a very competitive market [and] when I came here ... our starting salaries were lagging. So, over the next three years, we brought all salaries up to the 75th percentile of the average for the metro region. We became competitive.

I also introduced Teach for America as a strategy to bring in some bright young people who wanted to explore teaching as a possible career choice. And we used what we call the A+ Program to bring in midcareer changers who might want to teach.

Atlanta also has invested more than our peer districts in on-the-job support for teachers: coaches, model teachers, teacher leaders, facilitators. We've put people in school, on the ground,

working with our teachers ... demonstrating new techniques, discussing data on instruction, making suggestions about how to do a better job.

We focus heavily on teacher quality. We believe we've done a very, very good job at the elementary level in raising teacher quality. We're getting some traction at the middle and high schools, although we've a lot more work to do there.

Are you worried that today's economic troubles could stunt the academic gains in Atlanta?

Very much so. We looked at our budget projections for 2011 on out, and the best we can determine, it's scary. If the economy doesn't get better and the state doesn't begin to fund us at a higher level, we would really be in serious trouble. We've been fortunate to have the resources to do the kind of work we've done. But everything we've talked about has cost money. None of it is cheap. If we don't get money going forward, we'll never finish the job we need to do, especially in the middle and high schools, or sustain the gains in our elementary schools.

If there was one lesson you'd like school boards to take to heart, what would it be?

Only one lesson? Because school boards are elected, they're often very much constituency-driven. But school board members really have to convince their constituencies that their focus first and foremost is on student needs.

That means we can't, for example, have a revolving door of superintendents because people don't like the superintendent. We know that if we have unstable leadership and a revolving door of superintendents, students are not going to improve.

We have to figure out what are the requirements to have student achievement on a trajectory that shows improvement every year. You have to let the public know that this is why you are behaving the way you are. You're not going to micro-manage. You're not going to get into issues that really are administrative, because you want the superintendent and administrative team to focus their energies on student achievement.

Any final thoughts?

I think lots of people have given up on public schools, particularly public schools that serve children in very challenging environments. I would encourage them to start looking at public schools that are working.

We should identify what it takes to bring systemic improvement to a school system. People have been running good individual schools since I got into education, but there also are examples of systemic improvement. We need to know what needs to be put in place. How do we get those conditions to exist in more places so more children can be successful?

To me, public schools are an important ingredient of our democracy and economy. As go the public schools, so goes this country. We've got to invest in what works. ■