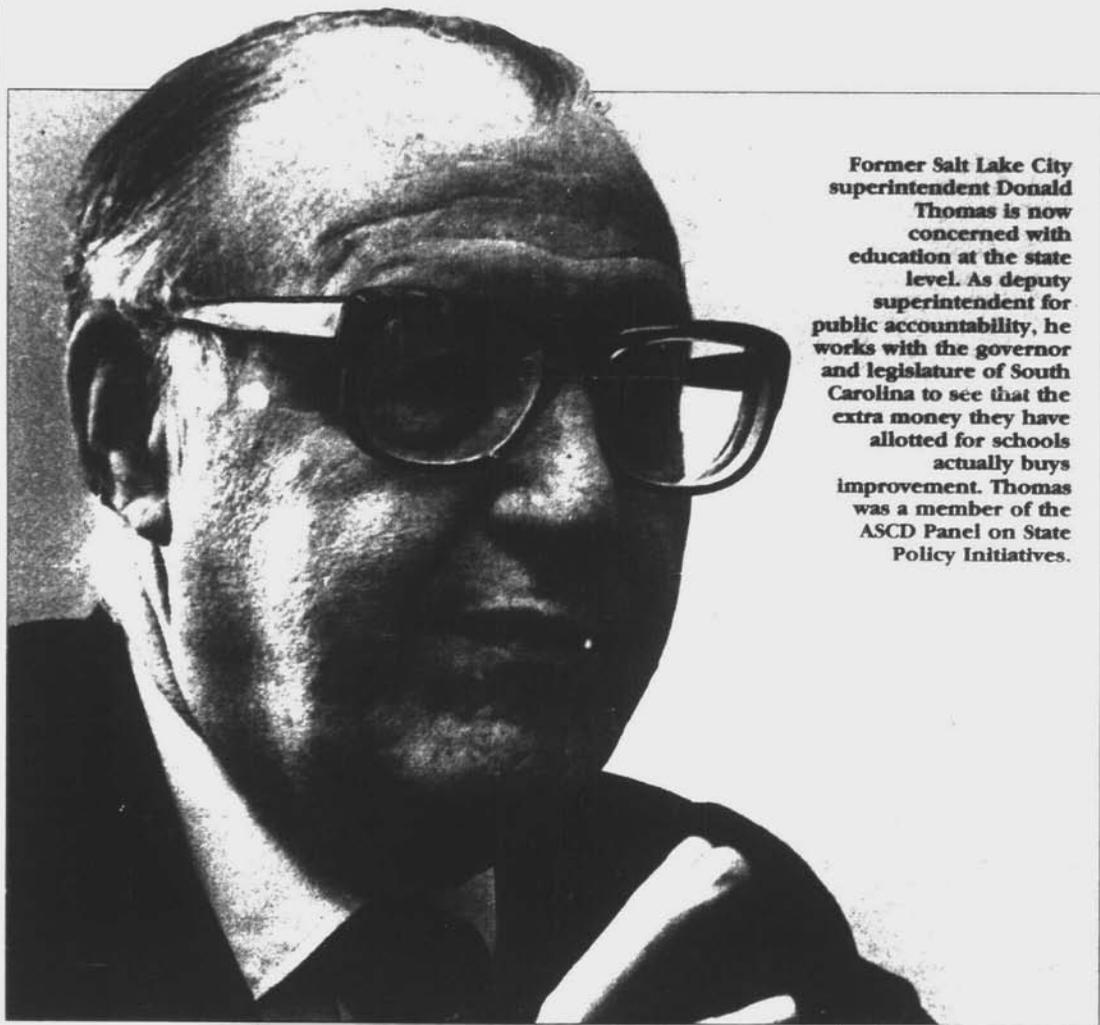


A Conversation with **Donald Thomas**



Former Salt Lake City superintendent Donald Thomas is now concerned with education at the state level. As deputy superintendent for public accountability, he works with the governor and legislature of South Carolina to see that the extra money they have allotted for schools actually buys improvement. Thomas was a member of the ASCD Panel on State Policy Initiatives.

You were a nationally respected superintendent but now you're working at the state level. How has that changed your view of education?

It has broadened my view considerably. I've become aware of individuals who influence decision making to a far greater extent than educators. Working with the state department puts me in close proximity with the governor's office, the legislature, private sector leaders, and other persons who influence expenditures in the state. It makes me see that influences come from external groups as well as internal ones. I am much more aware now of the need to build bridges with groups that a superintendent normally doesn't work with.

What about educational priorities? What were your priorities in Salt Lake City?

First of all, we were trying to increase student achievement. When I went to Salt Lake City, the levels of achievement were considerably below national norms. Second were equity issues: providing better education for Hispanics and broader opportunities for blacks, while at the same time maintaining a higher quality effort for all the children. We had to work at getting broader financial support. After we got community support we were able to pass a bond election. Further, a tax rate increase made it possible for us to reduce the teacher-student ratio in the first three grades from 1:30 to 1:25. We also introduced a gifted program. Another item to which I gave high priority was personnel evaluation. As you recall, the Rand report said that Salt Lake City had one of the four best personnel evaluation programs in the nation. And an area of great interest was to build bridges with the community at large—parent volunteers, parent support systems, parenting classes, community education—to create a learning community like that called for in *A Nation at Risk*.

Many of these priorities are the same, then.

In South Carolina, they're all written

into the law. The law requires the building of partnerships with the private sector, with parents, and with the community at large. It requires that incentives be based on increases in student achievement, and it certainly requires attention to equity. I have to examine attendance data and achievement data in various ways to see that poor children are making progress. I would say that my priorities in Salt Lake City and South Carolina are quite similar.

Your job in South Carolina is a little unusual, isn't it?

Yes. Only New Jersey and North Carolina have positions like it. My title is deputy for public accountability, and I am responsible for ensuring that state expenditures are producing benefits. Specifically, South Carolina raised its state sales tax two years ago to support an increase for education of about \$200 million. Fortunately, in just two years we have already seen improvements: attendance has increased, student achievement has gone up, buildings have become better, principals are being assessed, inservice education is extensive, and public confidence has increased. At the end of the three-year period for which this office is established, we will report to the legislature, on the basis of our data, whether or not the benefits that were intended by the law have, in fact, been established.

Your role is temporary, then?

Yes. I intend after that time to go back to Salt Lake City to assume the position of vice president for the Kelwynn Group, a national education training organization. The 1986 South Carolina legislature extended the life of the division for three more years and expanded the responsibilities of the division deputy.

Why did the legislature think it necessary to create a new position?

I think it's just a matter of public confidence. This is an extremely sensitive thing to discuss because educators become defensive. The reality is that



in most enterprises there's a way to get accountability. In the marketplace, services are purchased only if they're considered valuable. In the investment world there is the Securities and Exchange Commission to prevent fraudulent activities. In the public sector there is always internal accountability, but the public wants some form of external accountability.

In my case it was a kind of compromise. The division for public accountability is in the state department of education and I report to the state superintendent, but the deputy is perceived to have a great deal of freedom to report directly to the governor and to the select committee of the legislature. This has now been established in law by the 1986 South Carolina legislature. That makes some people nervous, but an individual could not do this job effectively without such independence.

The point is that it's a state position. When I go around the country I find that educators are very

concerned about pressure from governors, legislatures, and the whole state apparatus.

I think that external groups like governors, legislators, and state leaders finally have been convinced that a state's economic development depends on good schools. They have acted on that much more quickly than the education community wanted them to act, but when economic conditions are threatening, when the state is losing revenue, when there's high unemployment, the folks in the private sector respond quickly. They are thinking about the recent history of automobiles, of steel, the textile mills. Now, I personally believe that their response has been appropriate and needed, but it has frightened some educational leaders. When we have lived with it for awhile, though, we'll learn that, one, they're really our friends, they're out there helping us get the bucks for education; and, two, we can rely on them not only for the short term, but for the long term as well. Governor Alexander of Tennessee didn't pick up education for one year and something else another. He has stuck with education. Governor Riley of South Carolina has made education a top priority for a long period of time. We ought to be thankful that we have governors on the education bandwagon.

But many educators are concerned that well-intended but precipitous actions can produce undesirable side effects that non-educators often don't anticipate.

Some of the reform efforts are based on assumptions that are probably not accurate. For instance, the testing of teachers already in service is aimed at getting incompetent teachers out of the business. That's not an accurate assumption; it will get out people who don't have good literacy skills, but not incompetent teachers. If we want incompetent people out of the profession, we do that through the evaluation process and we make individual decisions. Another assumption is that we don't have enough young people of talent going into teaching. The response has been to overregulate the system, which may make things worse. So there are some errors in judgment.

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That seems to be true of career ladder programs. In several states plans have been developed so quickly that educators have felt left out.

I think the biggest error made in connection with career ladder plans is developing an incentive program that is uniform throughout a state. Florida has already recognized that it has made a mistake. North Carolina is being very hesitant. Tennessee has moved so quickly because of the governor's leadership.

Incentive programs must be designed district by district because they can work only where people trust each other. We're trying to develop some models in South Carolina and give districts a choice. I think the possibility of that working is better than if we designed a state model and said, "Here it is."

You seem to be distinguishing between the content of the reforms and the process by which they are implemented. Let's talk first about the reforms themselves. Which of the many reforms you know about have the best chance of really improving education?

The reforms attached to the effective schools movement have great merit,

both for improving academic achievement and for equity. Reforms such as leadership training for principals, creating high expectations for students, monitoring student achievement continuously, analyzing the data on a disaggregated basis—these are the kinds of things that are going to improve our schools.

Another set of reforms that is very important is the effort to improve the selection and preparation of teachers. For example, I think the move to raise standards for entry into teacher education is going to stick. And a very encouraging development is the new collaboration between colleges of education and school districts so that certification of teachers becomes a joint responsibility.

A third type of reform I think is important is that we're beginning to look at salary structures differently and trying to find ways of differentiating teacher salaries more appropriately. I expect something to evolve that is different from the current salary structure, but it will also be different from current conceptions of career ladders. A school-based incentive program is a real possibility.

What other possibilities are there?

Well, there are bonus plans based on school achievement rather than individual class achievement. We could say that if a school does extremely well we will give it a sum of money to be distributed to the teachers as a bonus, just as the major leagues do when a team wins the world series. Or we could develop programs that give nonmonetary awards, like sabbaticals, to individuals who do extremely well. We need other kinds of incentive programs over the long run, because we just will not have the fiscal ability to support career ladders when we get 60 percent or more of the people at the top rung. One other point: the contribution of incentive pay is that it will drive curriculum development and personnel evaluation. In order for teachers to do well, they will have to know more about curriculum. It will also push administrators to have better evaluation programs in order to differentiate the quality of service provided by teachers.

You've mentioned three types of reforms that you believe have merit: effective schools and two initiatives related to the teaching profession. Any others?

Another reform that I believe is important, although we don't have a lot of hard information about it, is parent involvement. Parent councils, for example, seem to be of value; unfortunately they generally are most valuable to the people on the council. Those parents know about the school, and it helps their children. But there must be ways of involving larger numbers of people in school affairs.

We've gotten heavily into forming partnerships with the business community. That builds friends for education and may even make the operation of districts more cost effective. I don't think we're seeing any direct results from that in student achievement, but that's an unsettled question.

We also have a very strong movement to assess principal candidates prior to their being appointed as principals. It's not yet fully clear whether the assessment process does identify the most effective principals, but there have been some very powerful studies that apparently validate the assessment center process. Again, this is something we should examine very carefully.

It's interesting to me that some of the reforms you mention are really very long-term matters and yet, for example, you are trying to show—and are showing—some gains in a three-year period. Any gains of that sort are necessarily moderate in comparison to what might be accomplished over 20 or 30 years, though. For example, it will take a long time before the effects of principal selection efforts show up.

The assessment program in South Carolina is designed to make judgments on longitudinal data rather than just year-to-year data. When I met with the select committee, I said that sometimes in education we do our research by planting a tree and then lifting it up every six months to see if the roots are growing. They understood what I meant, so many of our evaluation strategies will rely on longitudinal data.

Let me give you an example. We're providing a large amount of money to

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better educate what we call compensatory children in the early grades. Whether that expenditure is worthwhile and benefits accrue to the state of South Carolina will depend on whether or not those children increase their achievement levels and *maintain them*. If at the 5th or 6th or 7th grade level they lose whatever gains they've made, the conclusion will be that something is wrong and the money could be better spent some other way. So we will have to look at the data over a long period of time. The same is true with principal selection efforts.

I suggested that we try to talk first about content of the reforms and then about process. You've mentioned reforms you feel are especially advantageous. What examples do you see of where the implementation process is working well and where it's not?

There are some exemplary states like South Carolina that have formed a coalition of teachers, superintendents, the business community, and other external groups. First of all, the governor of South Carolina formed a partnership with the state superintendent. The two worked together, developed a program together, went to meetings

together, and were seen as solidly in support of the reforms. Then they brought teachers into the coalition by guaranteeing in law that salary levels would be at the southeastern average. They brought in the business community by establishing accountability measures, incentive pay, and stronger staff evaluation programs. They got in the parents and minority groups by building in expenditures for compensatory education and remediation. By bringing all of these groups together and forming a coalition, they were able to get strong support.

In Texas, there was no extensive coalition. They had the governor's office and they had the private sector, but they did not bring in the teachers. Therefore, the teachers and many administrators—perhaps the administrators most of all, because of the difficulties they see—are fighting the reforms. In Florida and Tennessee the teachers are still fighting career ladder programs. But teachers in South Carolina have been exemplary in their support of the reform efforts.

By teachers, do you mean individuals or the establishment?

I think by and large individual teachers have been supportive, but I can only report the official position of the organized groups. Those positions are positive toward merit pay, evaluation, and peer review.

What do you foresee happening in the school reform movement in the next several years?

We're beginning to examine several things in South Carolina. In our initial thrust to reform education, we may have overregulated local school districts. I think we'll probably consider cutting down on the number of regulations. I think we'll also begin looking carefully at some of the high-risk students who are still falling out of the system. Even though we may have reduced the dropout rate, there are still a significant number of individuals who are not successful in our schools. We also need to examine vocational education and adult illiteracy.

What do you predict may be ahead for the school reform effort across the country?

More and more states will be developing, or expanding, statewide testing

programs. It's a natural for them; it's a way of reporting. I know that a lot of educators feel that we're overemphasizing testing, but criterion-referenced tests developed by the state to measure quality are appropriate. More and more states are going to do it. I believe there will be more attention to evaluation than to career ladders. I expect to see a retreat from career ladders because of the experience we've had in Tennessee, Florida, and North Carolina, especially when people start projecting the cost of career ladder programs for an extended period.

We're probably going to see more attention to working conditions of teachers. Of all of the things that could help attract better people, the most important is the perception of teachers about their jobs. We could do all we want, but if teachers perceive themselves to be in an undesirable position we're not going to recruit the best people—because it's teachers who attract teachers to the teaching profession.

So policymakers have to contend with two major thrusts: increased accountability and trying to make teachers feel more satisfied with their profession. The difficulty is that those two can be in conflict.

Right. But policymakers are beginning to recognize that in our efforts to produce accountability we may be making schools oppressive and less desirable. So we have to design programs that provide accountability without oppressing educators. We may be able to limit accountability measures to those districts that are below established standards.

Do you expect that more states will look to South Carolina and try a collaborative approach rather than a mandated approach?

I think so. South Carolina has become a model for collaborative action. All candidates for governor have pledged to continue the cooperation established by Governor Riley.

Many of our readers are local administrators, not state policymakers, and some of them have felt pushed around by the school reform effort. How do you suggest they can prepare for the new wave?

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First of all, for their own mental health, they have to feel they are not overwhelmed and that the world is not oppressive. I've been in this profession 38 years, and most of the things in the reforms are not new; they're just described in different language. They are appropriate and manageable.

From what you said earlier, you apparently believe that governors and legislators have good intentions, that in fact education does need some of these changes, and that we shouldn't be satisfied with the status quo.

You bet! But I don't think we have to be a patsy for all the changes, either. For example, there have been attempts in some legislatures to do away with due process. If I were a superintendent they'd have to do it over my dead body. There's no way that I would compromise due process of law for anybody, including first-year teachers. You might be interested that in Salt Lake City we did not have a probationary period because of my insistence that everybody is entitled to due process protection. At first the board was leary of it, but it was one of the best things we ever did. There are some things the legislative bodies may wish to do that educators should fight, especially if they're against the basic

principles of this nation: due process, access to information, public involvement, parent choice, and equity for all children.

What about the federal government's role in improving American education?

Well, the possibility of the federal government assisting education monetarily is very, very weak. Secretary Bennett's emphasis on the states taking a more aggressive role is appropriate given the current conditions. His insistence that education is a state function and that it should, therefore, be supported with state resources is historically correct. Now, there are some who will argue appropriately that there are some educational matters of national concern such as the high dropout rates of Hispanics. I do believe that there is a legitimate place for Chapter 1. But I'm convinced that the current administration is not going to fight very hard for an expansion of Chapter 1 or additional equity measures. I'm also convinced that we're not going to get a lot of new money; they don't have it. I do believe, though, that national leaders ought to speak well of the institutions of government. I don't like superintendents who knock the mayor or superintendents who say, "This is a lousy job." We ought to be loyal to the institutions of government—and the greatest loyalty ought to be expressed by national leaders. They ought to know that they are working for government, they are servants of the people, and they ought to be supportive. In other words, I feel that the proper stance of national leaders like Secretary Bennett and President Reagan is—rather than heavily criticizing the schools—to motivate, to inspire, and to instill loyalty to our public institutions.

Educational leaders have great influence. That influence, however, is lost without a basic commitment to public service—being in education is the best public service one can provide. There is nothing more noble than being a school leader. □

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