

Michael Casserly, Longstanding Urban Schools Advocate, to Pass the Baton

By Stephen Sawchuk on December 19, 2019 4:50 PM

For more than 40 years, Michael Casserly has helped steer the Council of the Great City Schools, a membership organization of the country's large, urban school systems.

Over that impressive tenure he's seen the Council more than double in size, begun new technical-assistance programs for member districts, and helped guide the organization through some major education policy landmarks of the 20th and 21st centuries. Those include: the 1983 release of "A Nation At Risk" report, which kicked off the modern "school reform" era; the groundbreaking 1989 Charlottesville summit on education; the rise and fall of the 2002 No Child Left Behind law; and (several) debates over national content standards.

Next year, he'll be passing the baton on.

Casserly announced Dec. 19 that he'll step down as the organization's executive director in December 2020. He will still be deeply involved in the Council in an advisory capacity through 2024. Describing the decision as the most difficult he's ever made, Casserly said in an interview that there was no one factor in his choice.

"There's nothing that prompted this, other than my own sense that it was really time for a new generation, new blood, new energy, new ideas to lead the organization forward," he said.

While the details of his advisorship aren't entirely worked out, they will probably include continuing to work on some of the organization's recent professional-development initiatives. Meanwhile, the Council has had a transition plan in place for some time and will begin a national search for Casserly's successor.

Casserly began as the council's legislative and research director in 1977 and served in that role for 15 years before becoming the CGCS's executive director in 1992. The organization has grown from 24 member districts when he first started working for the Council to 76 today. There's no way to sum up in brief all of the marks Casserly has made on the organization, but the most notable is his continued fierce advocacy for urban schools and the assertion that they deserve investment and support.

Under his tenure, the Council has also been notable for some brave policy moves. Casserly helped convince the first crop of districts to participate in the Trial Urban District Assessment, or TUDA, which reports out achievement scores for districts to supplement the state-by-state results from the Nation's Report Card, and advocated for Congressional funding to cover the program. The CGCS diverged from other education organizations in supporting the NCLB law, and threw its hat in the ring in favor of common standards.

More recently, it has turned its attention to governance and improvement. It now offers audits of member districts to help them seize opportunities to improve, as well as a school board member training program developed with Harvard University.

Casserly agreed to answer a few questions about his work and legacy; the following is a lightly edited transcript:

Q: You were a supporter of having districts participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress' TUDA project. Why was that important, and has it changed the conversation around urban districts and urban district performance?

A. I think people were very surprised that we would do it. There were people who thought we were crazy. But, honestly, the reason we did it then is the same reason that we continue to participate in it: We wanted a way to assess whether or not all of the improvement efforts that were going into urban education were having an effect. We wanted to be able to compare ourselves across state lines in ways that the 50 state assessment systems simply did not allow. And three, we were aggressively pursuing improvement efforts and various reforms. And we wanted to see, we wanted a way of determining what seemed to be working and what wasn't working.

I think it's helped demonstrate that improvement is happening. It may not be as fast as everybody would like, but it is occurring. And it's clearly occurring at a rate faster than the nation. ... Improvement needs to accelerate; we get that. But it does help us demonstrate that improvement in urban public education is quite doable.

Q: The Council held a very different attitude towards No Child Left Behind [than other education groups]. You were generally supportive of the law, if not every last detail. You had to have known that the [test score] results were not going to look great for some of your member districts. Why was this an important stand for the Council to take? And what do you think the effect of that was?

A: I think we were the only one of the national ed. orgs that explicitly supported NCLB. The [National Education Association], [school superintendents' association] opposed it, and [the American Federation of Teachers] had no position. Civil rights groups supported it as well, some after the fact, and we took a position before the final vote was taken. We thought it was important, as an urban coalition that was committed to improving performance, to back a piece of legislation that the public understood to be about improvement and accountability for results.

We did say in our letter at the time, if I remember right, that we didn't think a lot of the details of this would work as advertised or intended, but those details were not as important to us as signalling a new day for urban education and our determination to get better. So that's why we did what we did, and frankly we didn't care who else supported it or opposed it; it was an important opportunity for us to voice why we looked at this differently.

Q: You've put a lot more emphasis on curriculum and standards in the past 12-13 years, beginning with an endorsement of national content standards even before the Common Core was developed. What was the thinking behind that?

A: I think we were the first national membership group to come out in support [of shared standards], and we had our superintendents individually sign a letter in support of the standards, before they had even been finalized. The thinking that went into this was similar to the thinking with NAEP and NCLB. And that was that we were determined to improve on behalf of our kids, and we understood what the cost of differential and low standards, what the cost had been to urban schools over the decades, and

that too many of our kids were held to low expectations and low standards. We were an advocate for higher standards and more uniform standards because we thought it would be a way of ensuring our kids were held to the same high standards everyone else's kids were held to. It was as simple as that. It was an equity issue for us.

Q: These days the idea of the very concept of an urban district is different, I think, than it was when you began. Now people talk about the "portfolio model" of urban school districts, but charters were in their infancy when you took the reins in 1992. How has this changed your work?

A: Yeah, I have to say that when I first got into this work in the mid 1970s, the landscape was really quite different in the sense that the big issues at the time surrounded desegregation and busing and flight from the cities, all of that. And it was a very tumultuous time for urban settings of all kinds and urban schools. Around the early 1990s when charter schools started to emerge out of Minnesota, it became pretty clear to us pretty fast that urban education, along with public education generally, was going to diversify and that we were going to see all manner of public schools run by all manner of people and organizations and the like.

I'd like to think that we've been pretty nimble in this discussion. Some of our folks are more pro-charter than other of our folks have been. And who runs them, what the political landscape looks like for them is really different from place to place. But one of the things that we did not want to do as we were pursuing improvements in our own districts was to get snagged in a political conversation, which we could devote enormous amounts of time and energy to and distract us from what we thought was the task at hand, which was get better. Let's get better at what we do, and if people want to compete with us, then fine, let's compete.