

The NASBE Interview

*Georgia legislators passed and Governor Nathan Deal signed the First Priority Act in 2017, which, among other things, created a new position of chief turnaround officer. In a novel arrangement, the CTO was to be hired by and report to the Georgia board. NASBE interviewed **Scott Johnson**, current chair of the Georgia board, and Georgia's chief turnaround officer, **Eric Thomas**, during NASBE's March Legislative Conference and about three months after Thomas began his new post in Georgia.*

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How did the Georgia state board come to play a hands-on role in school turnaround? How did it begin the conversation?

Scott Johnson: It starts before the conversation even begins. It starts with having a relationship with the legislators and key people that create legislation that allows the board to have input. When we have a state board retreat, we invite the education committees from the House and the Senate to sit with us and listen to staff, to experts, to folks that we think we need to hear from. We do shrimp and grits. And then I, or one of us, often attend the Education Committee meeting. I love the saying “You can pretend to care, but you can't pretend to show up.” By showing up, they know that we're engaged. Those things have built a relationship: We respect them, they respect us, and we have a full-on engagement with almost any legislation that will affect education.

How did the idea of the state board hiring a chief turnaround officer come up?

Johnson: The board and our state leaders felt that to do this, we needed a specific champion for those schools that need extra help. We decided we'd focus on the lowest performing 5 percent. If we could affect those, we thought that by working together, we could take what we learned and apply that to other schools as well: the 10, 15, then the 20 percent. I don't know at what point we decided we needed a chief turnaround officer, but we did early on decide there had to be an executive that would be responsible. We ended up having a national search to find the very best person we could identify, and we engaged NASBE in that process, which we're very pleased with.

Was there anything different about the personnel hiring process?

Johnson: This was different from anything I know of, and certainly at the state board level. It required more collaboration than it does to hire a vice president for my company or a senior executive, because we went to great lengths to get buy-in from a broad group of outside stakeholders. And the beautiful thing about it was that the board came to a decision on the best candidate, the group of stakeholders came to a decision separately, and we came to the same conclusion. [NASBE's] Kris [Amundson] and Robert [Hull], by the way, were very objective. They were not saying, “It needs to be A, B, or C of these candidates.” So we were really convinced we came out with the right result.

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Eric Thomas: I didn't know how the dynamics were going to play out. I just knew I was meeting with the state board and with this other group, and I didn't know if I had to sell this group, too, or if the state board was going to do whatever it wanted to do. But after the process was over, I walked into the position knowing that the stakeholder group by themselves thought this was the right decision, and it wasn't the state board finessing the process.

How did the board decide what characteristics it was looking for?

Johnson: Before we interviewed anybody, NASBE folks came to Georgia and asked, "What are the important traits of your ideal candidate?" So we identified those. Everybody got to have input, and there were six flipcharts full around the room. Then everyone voted on the top three traits that would make this chief turnaround officer successful. It was a good exercise.

What was interesting about this opportunity, Mr. Thomas, and how did you see your role?

Thomas: It sounded similar to work I was doing at the University of Virginia—working with schools and districts across the country to help them turn around their low-performing schools. But at UVA, our footprint in a school or district was limited because we were in Charlottesville. So the opportunity to have more of a hands-on approach where I could engage with schools on a regular basis intrigued me. What we're doing [in Georgia] is honoring the fact that kids walk into the schoolhouse with challenges. That wasn't a lens we leveraged at UVA. Unless you address mental health, nutrition, oral health, it's hard to ask kids to do exceptional work.

What did you do first?

Thomas: One of the things we attempted to do first is help people appreciate what the work was and what it was not. In Georgia in 2016, this whole idea of an Opportunity School

District [was on the ballot], in which the governor promoted identifying the worst performing schools, pulling them out of their districts, and creating separate districts. It passed the Senate, it passed the House, but it required a constitutional amendment. That had to go in front of voters, and voters did not approve it.

So when I walked into schools and spoke with superintendents and school boards, they remembered the Opportunity School District concept and believed that the state board was taking over their schools. That has been the major challenge: helping people appreciate that whatever happened 18 months ago, that's 18 months ago. We're not coming to take over your school. We're not coming to tell you what to do. We're coming to be a partner to help schools and districts.

Whom did you meet, and what was the message?

Thomas: Schools, principals, superintendents, boards of education, teacher associations, superintendent associations, school board associations, local media—you name it. Up until Christmas, I spent 60 to 70 percent of my time trying to get a message out, and I think it's worked. People have resonated with the idea that these so called low-performing schools have been in the same situations for decades, and you've got to do something. That has been a really important piece. We've tried to help people appreciate what would happen if we did nothing: We continue to get what we're getting. Doing nothing is not an option.

The number one value proposition is we're here to partner. The second is we've got to do something. And then the third value proposition is that there's an evidence base around the approach we're taking. There are more than a few exemplars around the country on things that you should be doing and things that you shouldn't. As a part of ESSA, all school improvement strategies and ventures have to have some sort of evidence base behind them. The RAND Corporation identified the work at UVA at a tier-two level of evidence, with tier one being the highest.

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Were there places where you were pushing on an open door?

Thomas: Here's the approach we took. The legislation [Georgia's First Priority Act] speaks to about the lowest 5 percent of the schools in the state—turns out to be about 104 schools. Those schools are represented by about 27 districts. What we decided was, let's not take on a hundred schools in November; let's start small. I looked at data—some quantitative, some qualitative. That led to many of the visits. Of the 27 districts, let's identify maybe five, six, or seven. The districts we're working with seem to be receptive. There were two or three that were not as receptive, and at this point, we're not going to force anyone to marry us. So if you're not exactly ready to partner, other people are, and maybe we'll come back in six months or twelve. That's been the approach. The state board really appreciated that, and we got guidance from them.

In this first set of schools, what will you be looking for as the early signs of spring?

Thomas: We went through a semitradi-tional approach to needs assessment. We had external teams do the assessment. They spent time in the district and time in the schools that we identified. Based on the needs assessment, we spent another day in each school, helping the school and the district think about potential strengths and weaknesses that would guide a 90-day plan. How do you monitor progress? We talk about leading indicators and lagging indicators. Lagging indicators would be state test scores. We won't see this year's state test scores until sometime late summer. So how do we know what we're doing between now and then is having some positive impact? We can look at student attendance, student discipline matters, teacher attendance. If you've had a culture challenge and you start to see an uptick in teacher attendance, it suggests you're starting to see some positive movement.

One of the things I want to look hard at is teacher retention. That's a strong leading indicator on whether turnaround is starting to have

a positive impact. Just the fact that teachers are leaving isn't necessarily a good or bad sign. If there is a process to identify stronger teachers, and your stronger teachers are staying, that's a good sign. If your weaker teachers are leaving, that's not necessarily a bad sign. Those are some things to take a look at to see if what we're doing in the first two to four months is starting to show signs of change.

In regard to classroom practices, we're working with schools and districts on something foundational: If you walk into any classroom in this school, what are the three or four things you expect to see? You're expecting to see alignment between an academic standard and what's taking place from a structural delivery standpoint. You're expecting to see engagement. You're expecting to see some form of assessment. Is there some strategy, some process, to determine whether kids are learning the material that they should be learning during that 55 minutes?

Do you have an expectation of the state board?

Thomas: I look to them for the big picture—what are we trying to achieve? Call it vision. I do believe some of this is my task, but they should be the direction setters, and part of my role is to execute that direction. One of the things I've asked for is clarity on what we're trying to accomplish.

I communicate with Scott and [Michael Royal, former chairman] routinely. Then, on a monthly basis the subcommittee meeting is an opportunity for all board members to be a part of the conversation, to share a thought or question. I attempt to not get too far ahead of the board. Having not been in Georgia, there are skeletons and landmines I do not necessarily know about. I normally reach out to Scott, Mike, the board: Here's what I'm thinking. Does this make sense? Does this fly? Because I don't necessarily know the context.

Johnson: This is not only Eric's first experience in dealing with a state board, it is our first experience at having someone that reports directly to the board—and that was

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very much on purpose. We're all feeling our way through this together, and I think we are hitting about the right note. As he said, Eric biweekly or weekly keeps in touch with me or Mike Royal—Mike being the former board chair but also now the chair of the First Priority Committee, which deals with school turnaround. Then we have outside stakeholders, which is really important, because that group was created as a part of the legislation, and it seeks to get buy-in from all areas of educational stakeholders. We wanted to make sure that the group was in place through the hiring process, because that was its purpose. But instead of just saying, "This is how we're going to find our chief turnaround officer," we said, "Let's keep this in place so we keep the buy-in."

What does this stakeholder group do now?

Johnson: They meet roughly monthly, discuss issues, and get a report from Eric. There are board members on this committee, but there are also people from higher education, teachers, administrators, superintendents, and association groups that are involved in education in Georgia. It is a broad group that can ask any question and engage anybody.

Thomas: And they also bring perspective. The group is called the Educational Turnaround Advisory Council. The executive director of the Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA) is on it. So as we're thinking about a district or we're thinking about an approach, she's got a lens that no one else could bring. The executive director of the superintendents' association is on that council. He brings a lens no one else brings to the table. I met with [the GSBA executive director] and her team, and we're talking about partnering with another district to bring the school board to this conversation also. That's not something we did this fall.

Do you have advice for state boards on how to start developing an approach to turnaround?

Johnson: Fortunately in Georgia, we had some forward-thinking legislators who wrote

this into the law. That is key. It's not the First Priority in Education Act; it's the First Priority Act. It is a top priority in Georgia. Our board was engaged in the writing of that law, and by virtue of being involved in and getting written into the legislation, we got specific guidelines on how to do the work. We didn't have to create this by committee. It's law. The governor was involved, and key legislators were involved.

Thomas: That's a powerful piece. We're not talking about policy; we're not talking about rough guidelines. There's a concrete law, and it allows all of us to go back to what the law says.

Johnson: And it will hold us accountable. We can measure how are we doing according to the legislation. [State boards should also] get a broad group of stakeholders. Even if you've got a law, you're going to have a problem if people are working against you. Creating this broad group of stakeholders—having their input, their pushback, but allowing them a place at the table—helps greatly.

Did the state board get everything right in this process?

Johnson: Even though [we had] this advisory group, we were in charge. The smart thing is, we did listen. It wasn't an arbitrary group of folks. We had input on who it would be. These stakeholders helped us set the right characteristics for the chief turnaround officer. We went through an intense process of selection and interviews. We did not rush it. It took us about a month longer than we intended, but that was because we took the process very seriously. If we don't do this well, we don't get another shot. Certainly, our board feels good about what we've seen so far, and now [that Eric has] identified needs for staff, we're going back to get additional funding for the upcoming year.

Thomas: This is new for the board. This is new for the state. This is complicated. There are low-performing schools in every state in the Union, so no one can say, "Here's how to do it." We've got an opportunity to create a model that others could replicate, but it is multidimensional. ■

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