

Henry grew up in Pittsgrove, NJ, where his parents owned a gas station. After graduating from Pittsgrove high school, Henry became a janitor for the school system. Now, 49 years later, Henry is the superintendent. He thinks next year will be his last because "half a century is enough."

Tammy grew up in Great Falls, Montana. She became a teacher and returned home to teach in the system she attended. She spent time as a principal and then worked in the central office. When the superintendent hired from California left because he could not relate to the community, Tammy was named as his replacement. There are many things that are interesting about the demographics of Tammy's district including the fact that there is a military base there with 10,000 soldiers. It's not your typical military base. Beneath it lie the cement bunkers that house our nation's nuclear warheads.

Barry grew up in the back hills of Tennessee. He went to college for just one year and decided it wasn't for him so he went to work for the railroad. After ten years on the railroad, he went back to school to become a teacher, eventually getting his doctorate. He now leads a small school district in North Carolina.

Henry, Tammy and Barry are just three superintendents I got to meet and learn from at the District Administration Leadership institute (DALI). Whereas most conferences endeavor to have as many attend as possible, the structure of DALI is to keep the conference small and interactive. Seventy-six superintendents from 30 different states attended this year's conference allowing plenty of time to hear about the state of public education throughout the country.

Speaking of the state of public education in the US, I hear pretty much the same is happening all over: dysfunctional state governments, an anti-public education agenda, sacrosanct status of charter schools, decreased funding, and "accountability schemes" that don't work. Illinois is the only other state like Pennsylvania that doesn't have a state budget yet. There, it is a Republican governor with a Democratically-controlled legislature. (Has the two party system run its course?)

Despite the ineptitudes of state governments to meet their constitutional obligations toward public education, superintendents throughout the country remain committed to the learning and lives of their students. Everyone is looking for ways to more effectively deliver instruction and to meet the ever increasing needs of children suffering the effects of our society's failings.

One of the strong themes of the conference was "personalized learning." The definition of personalized learning varies depending upon who you are talking to but a basic definition is: "knowing and meeting each student's needs." Personalized learning at its most rudimentary level involves frequent assessments of students (knowing) that allow teachers to direct each child toward the materials and learning experiences that he most needs (meeting). In this model, instead of just delivering information, teachers become "curators of information."

In my opinion, we already do a great deal of individualized learning in the school district. As a matter of fact, I already gathered some information for an upcoming Lancer Letter on the subject. Technology, however, is changing the degree and accuracy of what we can do to personalize learning for our students. Which brings me to the second major theme of the conference: using educational technology effectively.

I would have to say that our district is as technologically advanced as any when it comes to the utilization of technology for learning. In many cases, we are ahead of the curve. Most districts have some sort of 1:1 initiative. What I learned in this regard is to appreciate even more the teacher teams at our middle and high schools who did a great job rolling out the devices and who continue to do a great job supporting teachers and students in the implementation process. This has not been the case in many places, the prime example being the Los Angeles school district. There, they rolled out thousands of devices without a good plan, financing it with a 25 year bond. It was such a disaster after three years that they took the devices back and will still be paying for them not to be used for 22 more years.

In the next few months, I will be vetting with teachers and administrators the new ideas and products to which I was exposed. While we continue to garner praise for our district's successes, we can never rest in our quest to do the absolute best for our students.