

A Half-Century of Moving Children Forward

BY PAUL RIEDE

IN HIS 50 YEARS as an educator, James Thompson Jr. has earned his share of plaudits, including Connecticut's Superintendent of the Year award last year.

But the 72-year-old leader of the Bloomfield Public Schools, just north of Hartford, hasn't run out of challenges. Just this past year, he was confronted by a group of parents unhappy with uneven scores on the school district's 3rd- through 8th-grade high-stakes exams.

In his eight years leading the 2,100-student, majority-minority district, Thompson has overseen a 16-point increase in graduation rates, from 74 percent to 90 percent, and double-digit increases in SAT scores. But, he acknowledges, while some grade levels improved on last year's Smarter Balanced test scores, others saw declines.

"The parents have every right to be concerned about this, and I agree with them," he says.

Thompson tackled the problem with the tools he sees as the keys to school improvement: consistent, strategic use of data and what he terms a "laser-beam focus" on each student. Among his strategies, he asked principals to meet with every 3rd- through 8th-grade teacher of record and to analyze each student's progress. Teachers then set individual improvement goals for each student and devised plans to meet them.

"We've been unpacking that data like you wouldn't believe," he says. "I think we have a good handle going forward, I really do."

Thompson's track record backs up his confidence. He grew up in Hartford and began his career there in 1969 as a 5th-grade teacher. He worked his way up the ladder in schools across the city, becoming a team leader, a vice principal and then principal of the struggling Simpson-Waverly Elementary School, which served some of Hartford's poor-

BIO STATS: JAMES THOMPSON JR.

CURRENTLY: superintendent, Bloomfield, Conn.

PREVIOUSLY: assistant superintendent for elementary schools, Hartford, Conn.

AGE: 72

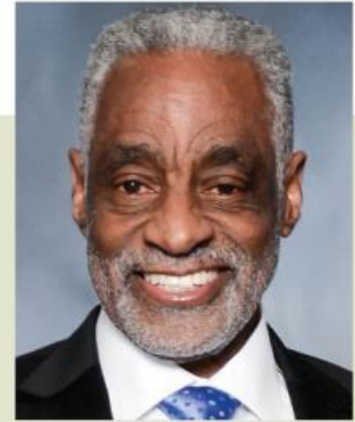
GREATEST INFLUENCE ON CAREER: Ray Jones and Edward Barlow, both banking executives, and Al Rogers, a local businessman and community leader, all encouraged me as I started my career in education. They provided a much-needed push in the right direction.

BEST PROFESSIONAL DAY: During my tenure as principal at Simpson-Waverly Elementary School in Hartford, we received the No Child Left Behind National Blue Ribbon Award. The school was in one of the poorest sections of the city.

BOOKS AT BEDSIDE: *Good to Great* by Jim Collins; *The Children in Room E-4* by Susan Eaton; and the Bible

BIGGEST BLOOPER: While I was offsite at a principals' meeting, UConn athletics presented our students with CDs as incentives for their attendance. Let's just say, the CDs were not vetted. Students brought the CDs home. I got calls from the parents that evening — and several media outlets showed up at my school.

WHY I'M AN AASA MEMBER: The organization provides relevant information about research and best practices and opportunities for networking.



est neighborhoods. He stayed there for 17 years, improving it to the point it was feted as a National Blue Ribbon School in 2003.

Thompson then took his expertise to the Connecticut Department of Education, serving as a consultant there for two years. He also was in demand nationally, consulting with school leaders in New Orleans, Dallas and Kansas City, Mo.

After returning to the Hartford district for four years as assistant superintendent for elementary schools, he crossed the city border to accept the Bloomfield superintendency. There he tailored his successful Hartford measures to the circumstances in his new district, creating a new learning culture.

"I think you have to inspire people," he says. "You also have to create a structure that allows people to have a voice so they can be a part of something that's really meaningful."

Bloomfield's school board chair, Donald Harris, who has known Thompson for more than 50 years, says the superintendent is unfailingly energetic and cheerful in tending to some difficult challenges.

"He's a very hands-on type of guy, but he will give his teams the opportunity to take the ball and run with it," Harris says.

Thompson has developed his own regimen for staying inspired. "It starts with self-care, and it's something we don't talk enough about," he says.

For Thompson, who ran track in high school, the self-care starts early each day. He wakes up at 5 a.m. and is out the door by 5:45 to run three to five miles, bike 14 miles or hit the elliptical at the gym.

"I think staying fit helps, mentally as well as psychologically," he says.

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